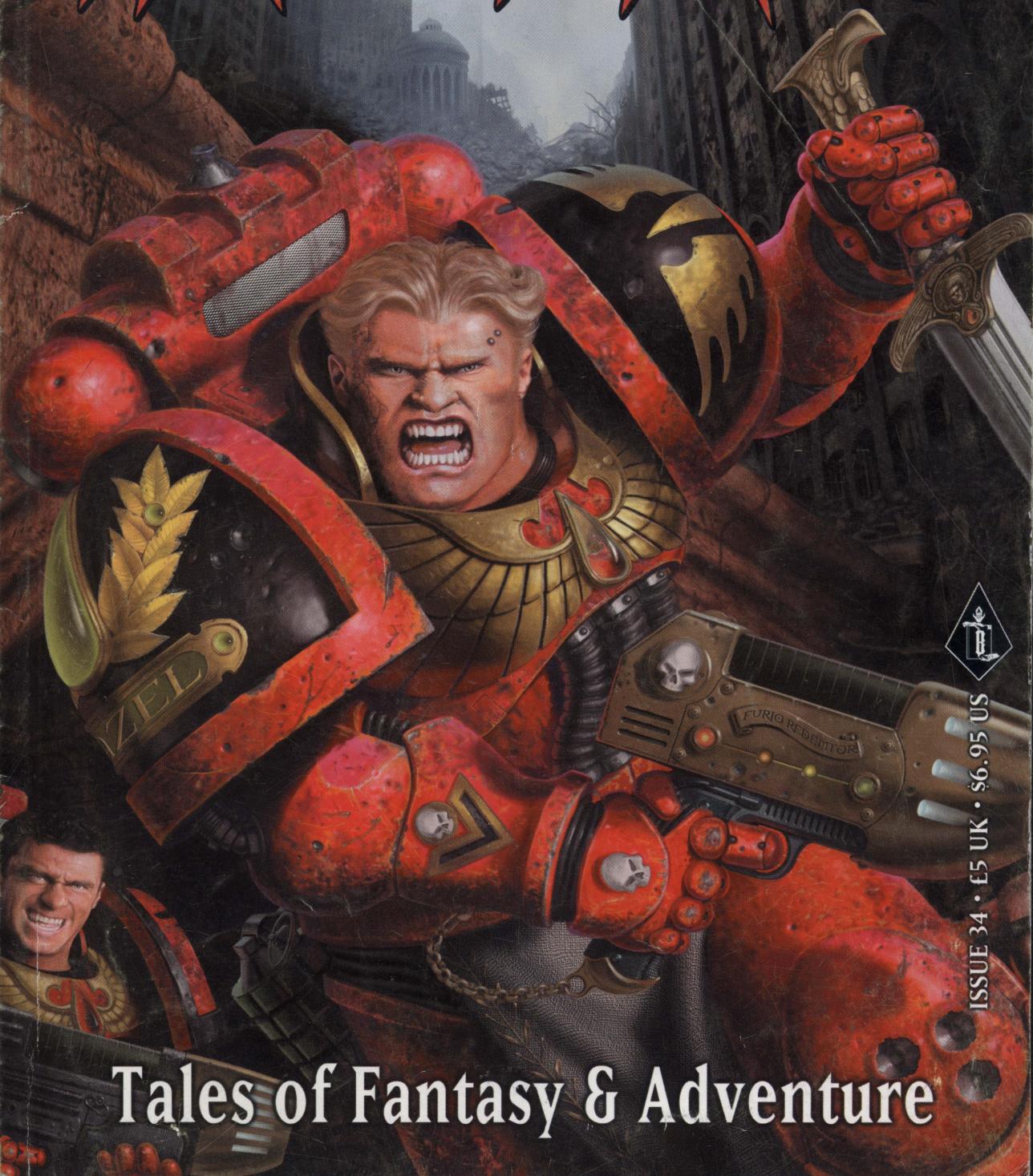


# INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

BY THE TIME you read this silly season will almost be here and this issue of *Inferno!* can keep you occupied in the last few days before Santa Claus pops down your chimney and brings you all those Space Marine boxed sets that you asked so nicely for. Of course, I'm writing this editorial at the start of November but silly season appears to have already started at the Black Library.

We've just finished putting together our not-altogether-serious look at how an issue of *Warhammer Monthly* is produced which can be found in the giant-sized issue 63 of that particular publication along with a free foil Warhammer 40,000 CCG card courtesy of our good friends at Sabertooth Games. And there's all your favourite characters and strips in there as well but perhaps not as you imagined them. Intrigued? Well you'd better get yourself down to your local comic book store and find out what it's all about. Or add it to your Christmas list next to all those Space Marine boxed sets.

We're also all really excited about the extended edition

of *The Fellowship of the Ring* which comes out on DVD in the next couple of days. I mean what could be better than the best film ever? The best film ever with an extra half hour of footage added and several hours of bonus material perhaps? And of course once the excitement dies down from that, *The Two Towers* will be in cinemas. I wonder if Marc's going to take us to see it again this year or are we all going to have sneak out of the office while he's not looking?

ONCE ALL the mince pies and Christmas puddings have been eaten then it's time to turn our attentions to a new year's worth of Black Library publications. I don't mean to sound like a politician when I say this but next year we promise you more carnage, more action, more mayhem and more of all your favourite characters, writers and artists. Highlights for next year include the seventh Gotrek & Felix novel, *Giantslayer*; the latest instalment of Gaunt's Ghosts, *Sabbat Martyr*; the first ever hard-cover novel from the Black Library, Dan Abnett's *Riders*

of the Dead and a background book taking a closer look at the three battles for Armageddon.

Both Darkblade and Titan will be returning to the pages of *Warhammer Monthly* and *Bloodquest* and *Lone Wolves* draw to their explosive conclusions to make way for the all-new Deathwatch strip and the further adventures of everybody's favourite underhive bounty hunter, Kal Jerico.

And not to be outdone, *Inferno!* will be kicking off the year with a trio of pirate tales courtesy of Dan Abnett and the return of instant fan-favourite Ciaphas Cain from the pen of Sandy Mitchell. There's also the small matter of the Gotrek & Felix special issue to coincide with the release of *Giantslayer*. Phew, I'd better get cracking!

All that's left for me to do is wish you all a happy holidays and prosperous new year.



Christian Dunn  
Editor

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# LEVIAATHAN

BY GRAHAM McNEILL

**T**HE FORGE ECHOED to the sound of iron on steel. Sweltering heat rippled the air and Uriel sweated as he worked the narrow, flat-headed hammer along a length of orange-red metal, rounding off the edges to prevent them from folding when the time came to draw out the blade of his new sword.

He worked the hammer up and down the blade, keeping the temperature of the steel as constant as possible. Working it too hot could cause it to burn, resulting in impurities within the metal rising to the surface of the blade and making the weapon brittle. Conversely, working the metal too cold would 'work-harden' the steel, resulting in fine cracks that would greatly weaken the blade.

Satisfied it was ready for drawing, Uriel placed it at the correct angle on the anvil and began hammering one edge. He flattened and straightened the resulting twist in the metal, turning the blade over and repeating the process.

His muscles ached from the long day and hot steam burned in his lungs with every breath. The stars glittered through the open roof and a warm breeze sighed in from across the mountains, carrying the scent of evergreen highland pines. He had not slept in six days, his time on Macragge as full as he could ever remember it being. The majority of this time had been spent reorganising the Fourth Company after the Pavonis expedition and inducting its newest members from the reserve companies. But he had made sure to set aside time for this work in the Artificers' forge chambers.

Uriel had until morning to finish the blade. The Fourth Company had been called to action once more, this time in the far-away system of Tarsis Ultra, and he was determined to finish the weapon before departing.

Upon his return from Pavonis he had immediately cast the metal icon taken from the Nightbringer's tomb into the deepest vault below the Fortress of Hera. With the cursed xenos artefact sealed away forever, he had then taken the broken blade of Captain Idaeus's sword and placed it in the Chapter's most sacred reliquary.

He thought back to his former captain and though he still mourned his friend and mentor's passing, he had now grown into his role as captain of the Fourth Company.

Idaeus had taught him well and shown him the value of thinking beyond the strictures of the Codex Astartes, the holy tome penned by the Primarch of the Ultramarines himself, Roboute Guilliman. Uriel would never consider abandoning the teachings of the codex, but it was clear to him now that there had to be some way of following the spirit of the codex, while observing the letter.

Uriel lifted the glowing blade, checking that the sword was the right length and correctly balanced. He nodded to himself and selected a smaller hammer from a tool table bearing all manner of fullers, punches, files and grindstones.

He began the relatively simple but time-consuming task of hammering the edges of the blade. Moisture dripped from his brow, hissing on the heated metal of the blade, and Uriel thought it appropriate that a measure of his own sweat be part of its forging. He worked the hammer backwards along the length of the blade, periodically turning the metal to keep it straight.

The Artificers had metriculators for exactly measuring the line of a blade, but Uriel preferred the honest feel of a blade worked by hand and eye.

Finally, he lifted the sword from the anvil and held it before him, checking for any bends or twists in the metal. Finding none, he turned to the roaring forge coals and thrust the blade deep within.

Uriel left the sword to heat and wiped his brow, walking back to the entrance of the forge and lifting a clay jug of mountain water from a battered workbench. He raised the jug to his lips and drank deeply. The water was a day old and had warmed in the heat, but was gloriously refreshing nonetheless. Uriel drained the jug in one long draught, setting it back on the workbench. He stared up into the star-filled sky, shutting out the ring of hammers and ritual chants of the Artificers in other parts of the forge.

Working in the forge, with the heat of toil burning in his muscles and the scent of the wilds of Macragge in his nostrils, he was as close to content as he had been following his confrontation with the Nightbringer. Uriel closed his eyes, trying to shut out the image of the deathly apparition of the alien. He still woke from sleep with the taste of blood in his mouth, visions of death filling his senses and the lingering filth of its diabolical thoughts staining his dreams.

He shivered and tried to push all thoughts of the ancient star-god from his mind as he returned to the forge coals and lifted the sword from the fires.

The blade glowed a fierce red-orange and Uriel knew it was ready. He plunged it into a trough of water and oil, steam hissing angrily from the cooling metal.

He pulled the sword from the water and smiled as he turned his gaze to a velvet wrapped object on his workbench. As the sword blade cooled, he unwrapped the bundle, revealing the golden sword hilt that had once held the blade of Captain Idaeus's powersword. As he began the tempering process, he nodded to himself as he felt his former captain's silent approval.

By morning he would have the weapon finished, its blade polished and sharp, ready to be anointed with water he had collected from Hera's Falls, at the end of the Valley of Laponis, and blessed by the venerable Chaplain Cassius.

Uriel could feel the sword's weight in his hand and it felt good, it felt natural.



**I**T WAS IMPOSSIBLE to tell what manner of aliens had constructed the original starship that rested in the heart of the space hulk. Blue-frosted glaciers and aeons of space-borne detritus had agglomerated across its surface to the extent that it was now buried beneath thousands of metres of ice and metal, grafted in sedimentary layers upon its surface. What was obvious was that at some point in its recent history it had been taken over by orks, customised and added to with whatever junk and debris that the green skinned savages could lay their hands on.

Rusted iron girders formed a tangled lattice across the ice and steel, and crude, airtight iron boxes were bolted to the ice and rock in a jumble of metal. The hulk was perhaps seven kilometres in length, spinning pieces of debris rippling from the ungainly structures like entrails from a torn belly. In a way, the orkish engineering was a marvel of unwitting skill, luck and blind lunacy, though no member of the Adeptus Mechanicus would ever admit to such a thing.

Its age was impossible to know with any degree of certainty. Perhaps it had plied the depths of space for tens of thousands of years before the orks had discovered it – or it had discovered them. Quite how such barbaric and warlike savages had the wherewithal to even get into space, let alone commandeer something so inherently dangerous as a space hulk was a mystery the priests of the Machine God were still baffled by. It defied every logical theorem that the orks ever managed to get their monstrously deformed contraptions space-worthy.

Regardless of such impossibility, once the orks deemed the hulk ready, it would be crammed full of warriors, with a vast power field bubble trapping the necessary oxygen within and then hurled into space on a random course through the stars.

The hulk would traverse the depths of space for an indeterminate time, sometimes dropping into the fluid medium of warp space as the ebb and flow of long-forgotten power sources surged and hurled the craft through the galaxy. Where and when such ships would emerge back into realspace – if they ever did – was a mystery that no one could explain.

If the orks were fortunate the hulk would emerge in an inhabited system, and if they were even luckier it would crash on an inhabited planet. The strongest warlord who survived the landing would emerge to lead the others in an ork crusade known as a Waaagh!

To say it was a haphazard form of travel was an understatement of colossal proportions.

The arrival of a space hulk in an inhabited system was a portent of great ill-omen and wherever they were encountered, their destruction was given immediate priority. It was a duty that often fell to the Adeptus Astartes, humanity's greatest warriors, who would board the hulk and destroy it from within.

And this space hulk, codified the *Death of Virtue*, was no exception. As it crossed the orbital path of the sixth planet of the Tarsis Ultra system, a single ship with crenellated weapon turrets and a cathedral-like command section emerged from the corona of the system's star and moved gracefully into a shadowing position.

Scarred with the fires of war, the Ultramarine strike cruiser, *Vae Victus* stood ready to send her warriors onto battle once more.



Lord Admiral Lazlo Tiberius, captain of the *Vae Victus*, looked up from the pict-slate on his command pulpit and asked, 'Philotas, do you have a firing solution locked in on the close-in surveyors, yet?'

'Yes, lord,' answered Philotas. 'Shall I order battle stations?'

'Aye, battle stations,' confirmed Tiberius, descending from the pulpit and striding to the stone-rimmed command plotter where his master of surveyors and Captain Uriel Ventris awaited him. He rubbed a hand over his scarred and hairless skull, staring at the new tactical plot that now displayed the exact position, course and speed of the intruder.

'Opinions?' demanded Tiberius.

'Well, it's drifting now,' said Philotas. 'That much we can tell from its speed. It's not travelling under its own power. It's a big one, that's for sure. It's no wonder the Tarsis Ultra system defence ships couldn't handle it. As to its course, it appears to be heading towards the planet Chordelis. On its present heading it should pass out of the system without incident.'

'But we can't take that chance. We must treat it as a hostile contact until proven otherwise,' added Uriel.

'Agreed,' said Tiberius. 'How did it arrive in the system? A jump? Or did it just drift in?'

'It drifted in,' said Philotas. 'It appeared on the outer rim surveyors about five months ago, coming from below the galactic plane, but they are unmanned and it did not pass close enough for a pict-capture.'

'Damn,' hissed Tiberius. 'Where did it come from?'

'From the regions of space we know to be controlled by an ork warlord known as the Arch Fiend of Octarius,' replied Philotas.

'What do you think, lord admiral?' asked Uriel. 'Is this the vanguard of an ork invasion?'

'No, I do not believe so,' said Tiberius.

'Why not?'

'Well, we would be seeing a lot more hulks if this was an invasion, Uriel. Orks don't come singly; they come en masse, in a green tide that smashes through anything in its way. You remember the reports we received following the invasion of Armageddon?'

Uriel and Philotas both nodded as the venerable admiral continued.

'Segmentum command at Bakka has issued several warnings of increased incidences of ork migrations from the realm of the Arch Fiend. They feel they are too fragmentary and disparate to be an invasion, and I agree.'

'Then if not an invasion, what is causing this migration?' asked Uriel.

'I don't know, but then you can never tell with the damned greenskins. Sector command seems to think that the orks are fleeing from something, but I don't need to tell you how unlikely that sounds.'

'But you think there are orks on board?'

'Aye,' said Tiberius pointing at a fluctuating set of numerals at the side of the display, 'but I don't think they will be alive. The mass readings look about right, but the mean internal temperature is probably too low and there does not appear to be enough interior oxygen voids for anything to survive – even orks. I think we are just looking at something that has split from an even larger ship, but we need to know for sure.'

'Are the auguries picking up any anomalous readings?' Uriel asked Philotas.

'None, but I wouldn't necessarily expect any just yet.'

Tiberius nodded. 'Continue monitoring anyway, I want to be ready for anything unexpected.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Range to target?'

'Nine thousand kilometres, lord admiral.'

A green icon winked into life on the display before Tiberius, indicating that the Thunderhawks in the prow flight-bays were now prepped and ready for launch. He pressed the flashing icon, acknowledging the information.

'Uriel, I want you and your men ready to launch within the hour.'

'We will be, lord admiral.'

'Plant those demolition charges quickly and get your men out of there,' ordered Tiberius. 'We're not on the hunt for archaeotech here. We're not there to cleanse any xenos infestation corridor by corridor. I just want this thing destroyed.'

'Understood, lord admiral. From the sound of things, I don't expect to find anything troublesome over there – but if we do we're ready for it,' assured Uriel.



**M**ASSIVE STONE arches supported the groined, stone ceiling of the launch bay and the air reeked of fuel and incense. Three Thunderhawks sat idling on the ready line, their engines growling as the crews built up power before take off. Tech Marines circled them, anointing their armoured sides with sacred unguents and removing the arming pins from the missiles slung under the wings in time with the Words of Ordnance.

The armoured deck rang with booted steps as the Ultramarines prepared to take the light of the Emperor into the dark places once more. Tech Marines accompanied by engineering servitors chanted mantras of ire to the gunships and cast the runes of war to rouse the battle spirits of each craft.

The crew ramps were lowered, and tracked lifter-servitors loaded cylindrical ammunition crates, supply boxes and demolition charges into the hold. The pilots and tech marines walked around the exterior of the gunship, ensuring every access panel was properly sealed. Uriel watched the scene of controlled efficiency before him with pride. Once more his company was going into battle and he relished the thought. It had been too long since Pavonis, and both he and his men were eager to prove themselves again.

He gripped the hilt of his new power sword. The weapon was yet to be blooded and, despite his belief that the hulk they were to board was lifeless, he hoped that there might be enemies yet to be discovered aboard that might satisfy his blade.

The armoured blast door to the launch bay rumbled open and two squads of space marines led by Sergeants Pasanius and Learchus entered, their bolters held at parade rest.

Uriel marched quickly to where his men had begun performing final checks on their equipment and running through their devotional prayers.

'Captain on deck!' bawled Pasanius and the Space Marines snapped to attention.

'As you were,' said Uriel, raising his hand. The armoured warriors returned to their pre-battle drills as he shook hands with Pasanius and Learchus. Even now, almost a year after the Pavonis expedition, Uriel found it hard to adjust to the idea of Pasanius having a bionic replacement for the limb he had lost fighting the Nightbringer thousands of metres below the planet's surface. The arm shone like silver, its surface smooth and brilliantly reflective. Truly the artificers of Pavonis had excelled themselves.

'Everything is in order?' he asked needlessly. He knew his sergeants would have everything prepared and trusted them implicitly, but as any commander worthy of the name would say: you could never be too prepared before going into battle.

'Of course,' affirmed Pasanius, pointing to where the Tech Marine was giving the thumbs up to the pilot in the cockpit of the Thunderhawk.

'Looks like our chariot is prepared, captain.'

'Gather the men; we depart in five minutes.'

'Aye, captain,' saluted his sergeants.



**U**RIEL'S BOLT GUN nestled in the rack beside him, its dull sheen gleaming with sacred oils in the red-lit crew compartment. He had honoured the battle spirit within the weapon before boarding the gunship and his armour was a fresh, brilliant blue; its surfaces smooth and untarnished. The Chapter's artificers on Macragge had repaired its fabric after the damage it had suffered on Pavonis, though the scar where the c'tan's infernal metal had scorched the backplate had resisted their every effort to remove it.

A Space Marine always honoured the battle gear that protected him and the weapons that were the instruments of the Emperor's will. To do any less would be to arouse the wrath of the war spirits that empowered such holy artefacts and no warrior would dare run such a risk.

Uriel gripped the hilt of his power sword and offered a prayer to Roboute Guilliman that he would prove worthy of his Chapter. He had not failed in his duty before this and vowed that he would not do so now.

For this present duty was entrusted to him by no less a person than the Primarch himself.

The defence of the Tarsis Ultra system was a sacred task of the Ultramarines, the result of an ancient oath sworn by Roboute Guilliman during the days of the Great Crusade. It had been a time of heroes, when the Emperor's own progeny, the Primarchs, had stood shoulder to shoulder and carved His realm from the flesh of the galaxy, wresting His worlds back from the domination of vile aliens and heretics.

Tarsis III had been one such world, liberated from the lies of heretic secessionists by Roboute Guilliman at the head of the Ultramarine Legion. The battles fought to reclaim this world for the Emperor were the stuff of fireside legend on Macragge, taught at every one of the many training barracks throughout Ultramar, as was the courage and discipline shown by the inhabitants in rising to fight alongside the Ultramarines. It was said that a lowly trooper of Tarsis III had saved the life of Guilliman in the last battle and such was the Primarch's gratitude that, at its end, he had dropped to one knee and sworn a mighty oath of brotherhood with the soldier, declaring that should Tarsis III ever be threatened again, the Ultramarines would return to fight by their side.

And in honour of the great victory, a grateful populace renamed their world Tarsis Ultra, that they might always remember their liberators.

Once more entrusted with the honour of the Chapter, Uriel knew that his victory on Pavonis had earned him this sacred duty and, though the oath sworn by the

Primarch was almost ten thousand years past, it was no less binding. He would see that the ancient debt was fulfilled.

This he swore by the spirit of the weapon he now held. He could sense the intensity around him and knew that his men felt the same.

He felt the motion of the Thunderhawk change as the craft pitched upwards towards the location the augurs had pinpointed as the most favourable location for the gunship to enter the hulk. Uriel watched as the vast shape of the *Vae Victus* yawed from sight through the thick vision blocks, and the screaming of the engines altered in timbre, the pilot making his final approach on manoeuvring thrusters alone. He caught a brief glimpse of the other two Thunderhawks, similarly laden with Ultramarines, making their way to their own designated entry points.

Slowly, the vision port was filled with the undulating flank of the space hulk, frosted metal caked with the residue of its voyage through space and cratered with asteroid impacts. A shiver rippled up Uriel's spine as he wondered where this vessel had been, where it had come from and what calamitous fate had seen it consigned to the icy graveyard of space. The thought of entering this craft filled him with a cold dread, and though he told himself it was simply the unclean nature of the vessel, he wasn't sure he believed himself.

Something had once made its home on this ghost ship and Uriel knew that none of the things that might do so would be friendly.

He saw a yawning chasm torn in the side of the gargantuan vessel, the twisted metal ringing it looking for all the world like fangs in some alien predator's gaping jaws. The thought was not a comforting one. The view through the block slid from sight as the pilot gently rolled the gunship, matching his speed of rotation to that of the hulk, and turned the ship to face the fanged maw they would fly into. Uriel watched as what little light filtered through the vision block was snuffed out as they flew inside the structure of the ancient leviathan.

The ready light above Uriel's head changed from a baleful red to a gently flashing amber and he knew they were almost in place.

The pilot's voice crackled over the vox: 'Depressurising in ten seconds. All crew go to internal air supply.'

Uriel disconnected his backpack from the gunship's own air tanks and sealed the valve, whispering the prayer of thanks to his armour's spirit as an icon flashed up on his visor, indicating that its integrity was intact. He checked that the air level in his armour's tanks was full and watched as his warriors followed suit.

The thinly engraved purity scrolls affixed to the gunship's venting systems fluttered as the pilot gradually depressurised the crew compartment, readying it for opening into the hard vacuum of the hulk's interior.

Uriel released the harness restraints and slammed a magazine into his bolter as he rose to his feet. The motion of the Thunderhawk shifted again, the engines rumbling and the deck vibrating with the tonal shift. The ready light flickered from amber to green.

Then, with a thump and groan of landing gear, they were down and the frontal boarding ramp dropped, slamming into a pile of twisted wreckage. Uriel nodded to Pasanius and together the two Ultramarines swiftly descended the ramp, weapons at the ready. Surprisingly, Uriel felt the weight of his armour and realised that there was gravity within the space hulk. It could not have been generated naturally – which told him that even if there were no inhabitants on board, then at least some remainder of their technology was still functional. The rest of the gunship's passengers disembarked and formed a protective cordon around their leaders as Uriel surveyed the interior of the space hulk. Bright beams of light speared from the frontal section of the gunship, illuminating their landing zone.

The chamber was a vast, echoing cavern of twisted, glittering girders bolted and welded in a random fashion to what must have been the flank of another starship, forming a groaning latticework roof some hundred metres above them. Stalactites of

ice drooped from the ceiling and jagged pillars of glistening blue rose to meet them. Steam feathered from the Space Marines' backpacks as they spread out through the frosted chamber, ice crystals crunching underfoot as they moved off into the hulk.

A multitude of beams from the Ultramarines' armour lights criss-crossed through the spectral twilight as Uriel stabbed his hand in the direction of a yawning slash torn through the wall two hundred metres before them.

'All teams check in,' ordered Uriel.

The vox bead in his helmet clicked and hissed with white noise. Crackling voices stuttered through his helmet.

'Squad Brigantus in place and moving inside.'

'Squad Learch... in pla... and... movi... in...'

'Sq..d .... arin in p..ce.'

'...s.a ...terion.....'

Uriel cursed as the last transmission faded from his headset, blocked either by the sheer mass of the hulk or some failing of their vox units. Tech Marine Harkus had warned that they tended to fare badly in the depths of hulks. Well, Uriel had personally briefed each of his team leaders and there was nothing more he could do for them. He was now beginning to understand something Marneus Calgar, the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines, had said to him before departing on the long journey towards Segmentum Tempestus and Tarsis Ultra: that there was a world of difference between leadership and command.

He approached the opening in the wall, his shoulder mounted illuminator revealing a wide, ribbed corridor of glistening, pustule-like growths that stretched off into the darkness. Thin scraps of mist clung to the floor and soft puffs of some unknown gas soughed from sphincter-like orifices in the pustules. Water dripped in a fine rain around the opening from melting ice above, and condensing air gusted around it. Uriel stepped through the opening, feeling his boot connect with something hard and metallic.

Lying on the floor, partially covered in the clinging mist, was a flattened sheet of iron, hammered into a crude representation of a horned skull. The jaw was sown with elongated fangs and, despite the crudity of the work, it was recognisable as a totemistic ork head.

Pasanus knelt beside the artifact, keeping the hissing nozzle of his enormous flamer pointed down the corridor.

'So it looks there are greenskins on this vessel after all,' he said.

'Aye, so it would seem,' agreed Uriel. 'But where are they?'

Both Space Marines looked up as the click of something moving from ahead sounded from the oddly shaped walls, throwing the echoes around them. Uriel pressed himself against the undulating wall, raising his bolter as Pasanus motioned the warriors of his squad forward. The Ultramarines moved in two-man fire teams down the corridor in disciplined groups as the noise came again.

Uriel followed his men, his footsteps sucking from the gelatinous, spongy floor. A soft, chittering sound rippled through the walls, the puffs of gas from the pustules feeling like the breath of some disgusting sea creature.

The corridor rounded a bend, the wet, organic walls abruptly changing to the armoured bulkheads and the rigid mesh of an internal floor so common on Imperial vessels. The walls were scorched black, pocked with fist-sized craters that Uriel recognised instantly as weapon impacts; too large for most small arms fire and too shallow for heavy weapons.

Human ones at least.

He'd fought orks often enough to know that their weapons were easily capable of inflicting this sort of damage. He opened a channel on the vox.

'Brother Flavian, front and centre. We need your auspex.'

Seconds later a Space Marine with his bolter slung and carrying a hand-held device with a gently glowing plate joined him. A soft chime sounded regularly from the device as the spirit caged within the

machine swept the architecture before them with an array of surveyors.

'Brother captain,' said Flavian, keeping his eyes trained on the device.

'How far to the first waypoint?' asked Uriel.

Flavian consulted the auspex, scrolling through the display and said, 'Two hundred metres, brother captain. Along this corridor and right.'

'Very well. Let's go – and stay alert.'



URIEL PANMED his shoulder-mounted illuminator around the columned chamber, noting the reading of his heartbeat in the bottom left corner of his visor display. Higher than normal, he saw, though he wasn't surprised. This place was damned and reeked of death. Uriel scanned the groaning structure above him. Hundreds of bowing columns supported a sagging roof of ice, the soft jingle of dangling chains and dripping moisture masked the sound of his breathing.

For two hours, the Ultramarines crept through the baroque interiors of the hulk, ghosting from waypoint to waypoint, planting explosive charges and following the soft, regular chiming of Brother Flavian's auspex. Patchy communications had been re-established with the other squads throughout the hulk, but each sergeant's reports were fragmentary. It appeared though, that the mission was going well and the remainder of his squads were progressing unopposed.

A circle of light from the Ultramarines' armour lights surrounded the kneeling Tech Marine Harkus, who set the last of the demolition charges Uriel's squads were to place. Silently, Uriel willed him to hurry up.

The longer they stayed here, the more his sense of trepidation grew and the greater the chance of encountering something hostile. The Lord Admiral believed the hulk to be abandoned and, aboard the *Vae Victus*, Uriel had agreed. But now, standing in the twisted, desolate

interior, he wasn't quite so sure. The groaning darkness of the hulk was an unsettling place, and Uriel felt the constant sensation of being watched.

The hulk creaked, though it was impossible to pinpoint where the noises came.

'By Guilliman, I'll be glad to see the back of this place,' Pasanius muttered, flexing his silver fingers on the grip of his flamer, the blue flame hissing at the weapon's nozzle.

'Aye,' agreed Uriel, glancing upwards as he thought he caught a glimpse of furtive movement. 'It is unnatural.'

Pasanius nodded grimly in agreement. 'It reminds me too much of the darkness below the mountains on Pavonis.'

'In what way?'

'I fear we may meet something as monstrous as the Bringer of Darkness, because this place is a tomb as well. People died on this ship and there are evil echoes here.'

'Evil echoes? That doesn't sound like you, my friend.'

'Aye,' said Pasanius with a shrug. 'Well, I don't like places like this, they bring out the superstitions in me.'

Uriel said nothing, but agreed with his old friend's belief. He had seen enough horrors in his time serving in the Chamber Militant of the Ordo Xenos to know that places of ill-omen could indeed resonate with ancient evils. The battle with the Nightbringer only reinforced that belief and was yet another reason to be done with this place.

There were creatures known to dwell on hulks like this and he did not relish meeting any of them.

He watched as Harkus flipped open the glass lens covering a brass dial on the face of the demolition charge and turned the delicate arms of the timer mechanism. A red light winked into life beside the timer and the Tech Marine intoned the words of arming.

'Holy Father of Machines, I ask thee to invest this blessed machine with a fragment of your divine wrath and beg your forgiveness for its destruction. *Destructus et abominatus, omnis mortis justicus.*'

Harkus made the Sign of Machine and nodded to Uriel.

'The demolition charges are now set, brother captain. Within the hour, this hulk will be nothing more than wreckage.'

'That thought fills me with relief, Brother Harkus. Now let us be on our way.'

Harkus concealed the demolition charge beneath a handful of ice shards and thin sheets of metal as the vox-bead in Uriel's helmet clicked and Brother Covius, his northern perimeter sentry, reported.

'Brother captain, we have movement here. I can hear the sounds of an approaching force,' said Covius.

'What kind of force?' hissed Uriel.

'I do not know yet, brother captain, I can see nothing beyond the edge of the chamber, but from the noise I believe there are a great many. And they are heading this way.'

'Brother Covius, remain in place until you can give me more information, then get back and join the rest of us,' ordered Uriel.

'Understood.'

Uriel circled his hand above his head and the Ultramarines closed around him. Even as they did so, Uriel could hear the sound of battle erupt in the distance. Gunfire and the crump of an explosion echoed from the chamber walls. He opened a channel to Covius as the vox crackled with reports from the other squads scattered throughout the space hulk.

'Contact!' bellowed Sergeant Learchus over the vox-net.

'Enemies!' shouted Sergeant Brigantus.

Uriel was about to demand confirmation on who exactly was attacking when the answer came in a shout from Brother Covius.

'Brother captain, they're coming!'

'Who, Covius? I need better information than that!' yelled Uriel.

But before Covius could reply, the signal was suddenly cut off as a fiery explosion blossomed at the far edge of the chamber and half a dozen stalactites crashed down from the ceiling.

Then through the flames came a wave of screaming foes, their bestial faces twisted in alien hate and their powerful bodies

rippling with bulging muscle.

Orks. Hundreds of them.



**T**HE ULTRAMARINES were ready for them. With bolters levelled they unleashed a deadly volley of mass-reactive shells into the mass of charging orks. A dozen fell to the first volley and a dozen more to the next.

The charge faltered in the face of such devastating firepower and Uriel could see an expression that might have been surprise cross the thick features of the closest ork as a bolt detonated within its ribcage and exploded its alien heart.

Pasanus's flamer roared, hurling a liquid sheet of promethium into the green mass. Orks bellowed as the fires consumed them, igniting others as they flailed in their death throes.

Bolter fire shredded those closest, but there were simply too many to kill before they reached the Ultramarine line. Uriel slung his bolter and drew his power sword as a massive, iron-jawed greenskin charged him, swinging a gigantic cleaver with a howling chainsaw blade. Thick sheets of metal were strapped over its shoulders and chest and Uriel leapt to meet it, lunging for the unprotected midriff. His sword plunged effortlessly through its flesh, sliding clear with a burning hiss.

The beast roared and bellowed something incomprehensible before swinging its cleaver at his head. Uriel almost failed to dodge, such was his surprise at the ork still being alive. He knew orks could withstand terrible damage, but he had practically cut this one in two!

He leapt to one side as the motorised cleaver hacked a wide gouge in the deck, shrieking in a flare of sparks as it passed through the metal. Uriel turned and swung wide and low, severing the ork's arms below the elbow.

All tactics were gone now; he spun on his heel and beheaded the monster with one stroke. Another ork barrelled into him,

slamming its hard-boned elbow against his head.

He fell, twisting out of the way of an axe blade as it swung towards his neck. He dodged as the axe descended again, kicking out and springing to his feet as the ork struggled to free the axe from the ground. He stabbed the ork through the head and kicked it from the blade as he tried to gauge the ebb and flow of the battle.

Scores of orks were dead, cut down in the initial volleys of bolter fire or hacked down by his warriors, but they fought with a dreadful ferocity and Uriel could see that there was a desperation to their fighting. He watched Pasanius smash an ork to the ground with his flamer, hammering his boot down on its neck with a sharp crack. Another reared up behind him, chopping downwards with a huge, broad-bladed chainsword.

Uriel shouted a warning, but the veteran sergeant was already aware of the danger, spinning around and catching the blow on his bionic limb. Sparks flew as the rusted teeth bit into the metal of his arm and even the massive form of Pasanius was driven to his knees by its force.

Uriel leapt forwards, slamming feet first into the ork's face. Yellow fangs snapped under his boot heels and the creature fell back, blood spraying from its mouth. Uriel rolled as he landed and drew his sword as he sprang to his feet. He drove the weapon through the ork's neck, almost severing its head completely.

Orks swirled around them, and both he and Pasanius hacked all about themselves with great disembowelling strokes of their swords. The chamber rang to the sounds of battle, but within moments it became clear that the orks did not have fighting on whatever passed for their minds.

The few survivors of the charge swept past the stunned Ultramarines, departing the chamber from the opposite side as fast as they had entered it.



**B**LOOD RAN DARK red from the ork's back where it had been laid open to the bone by Uriel's powersword. Apothecary Selenus knelt beside the body of the dead ork and looked up at Uriel.

'What exactly am I looking for?' he asked.

'Look at the wounds this creature has suffered and tell me what you see,' said Uriel.

Pasanius nodded towards the hulking corpse. 'What is it, brother captain?'

'I want to know why we beat these orks so easily and why they didn't stay to fight. Have you ever known orks to run from a battle?'

'No,' said Pasanius as Selenus gave a surprised grunt. Both Uriel and Pasanius squatted beside the apothecary, watching as he pulled apart two slabs of skin and muscle from the ork's back.

'Look here,' began Selenus. 'Brother captain, this is where your power blade cut the xenos. As you can see, the edges of the wound are smooth and cauterised from the heat of your weapon.'

The apothecary then rolled the ork onto its front and pointed to a wound running from its left shoulder to the base of its ribs on the right hand side of its torso.

'What are we looking at here, Selenus?' asked Pasanius.

'The blow that caused this wound cut through the creature's armour plating on its shoulders and sheared through the thickly ossified bone of its ribs with something incredibly sharp.'

'Another power weapon?' suggested Pasanius.

Selenus shook his head. 'No, the edges of this wound have not sealed or been seared as the wound on its back has been. This was done by something so sharp it was able to cut through iron and ork flesh with almost no effort at all.'

'Greenskins fight each other almost as much as they fight us,' pointed out Pasanius. 'Maybe another ork did it?'

'No,' said Selenus. 'The wound is too clean.'

'Do you know of any weapons that could have inflicted such a wound?' asked Uriel, already fearing he knew the answer to what it was the orks had fled from.

'Not many,' admitted Selenus, 'but here on a space hulk, there is one thing I know could have inflicted it.'

'Genestealers,' spat Pasanius.

Selenus nodded as the soft, regular chiming of Brother Flavian's auspex suddenly sounded with greater urgency.

Uriel and Pasanius looked up as the walls seemed to hiss and chatter with sudden movement all around them. Shadows darted across the ceiling, the chittering of claws scraping on metal echoing from the glistening walls.

'They're coming,' whispered Uriel.



**T**HE WALLS CHURNED with movement, the screeching hiss of aliens seeming to come from everywhere at once. As one, the Ultramarines assumed a defensive formation and began falling back to the entrance of the chamber, bolters pointed outwards at the walls.

Uriel edged closer to Brother Flavian, the entire time keeping his eyes trained on the hissing darkness around them. He gripped Flavian's wrist and raised the auspex, watching the sweep of the spirit across the pict-slate as it pierced the gloom with its all-seeing eye.

Distance and direction vectors glowed, and at the edge of the auspex, a blur of movement rippled, expanding and contracting slowly.

The soft chime sounded again, and again, and again. The gap between each chime shrinking each time.

'They're all around us,' whispered Flavian. Uriel could detect a hint of nervousness in the young space marine. Flavian was one of the many new recruits he had inducted into the Fourth Company to replenish their numbers after the Pavonis campaign and, though, like all Space Marines, he was brave, he was inexperienced. Uriel hoped this would not

prove to be both his first and last campaign.

Slowly, step-by-step, the Ultramarines edged back the way they had come.

Then, without warning, their unseen enemy attacked.

Brother Travion was the first to die, four clawed arms reaching from the darkness of the wall and dragging him backwards, ripping through his armoured breastplate in a welter of blood.

Pasanius turned and bathed the wall with liquid fire, lighting up the darkness with a brilliant orange glow.

Firelight glittered from alien eyes and bared fangs as the creatures attacked.

As though directed by a single, monstrous imperative, the genestealers boiled from the walls, ceilings and ducts. They were everywhere.

'Fall back! Get back to the entrance!' shouted Uriel.

Bolters chattered and Pasanius's flamer roared as the Ultramarines sprinted for the exit of the giant chamber. Uriel fired his bolter from the hip, cutting down more of the alien horrors with each salvo.

As more and more of the chamber caught light and pools of promethium burned, Uriel saw the creatures attacking them in all their horrifying glory.

Hunched over with grotesque, beetle-like carapace covering their bodies, the genestealers were powerful, six-limbed creatures, sprinting forward on muscular hind legs. Their upper limbs ended in vicious, tearing claws, and Uriel could see how easily these would rip through ork armour.

Space Marine armour too, were they to get close enough.

But it was the faces of the creatures that horrified Uriel the most.

Bestial and filled with hundreds of lethally sharp teeth, the genestealer's maw was spread wide in a hissing screech, its eyes utterly black and filled with alien malevolence.

Black and impenetrable, they could express nothing beyond the desire to kill.

Uriel shot down three of the creatures as they raced towards him, inhumanly fast. Another three hurdled the corpses,

coming at him with clawed arms outstretched. He ducked the first creature, grunting in pain as the claws of the second tore across his shoulder guard and cut through it like paper. Blood welled briefly in the cut, before the Larraman cells in his enhanced bloodstream sealed the wound.

He swept his sword out, hacking the legs from the third and rolled upright, raising his weapon before him as the first creature came at him again. It leapt, impaling itself on the crackling blue point of the weapon, purple ichor bursting from its jaws as the blade pierced its heart.

Uriel dragged the sword from the beast as the second genestealer leapt upon him from behind, tearing at the eagle on his breastplate with frenzied claws. Preternaturally sharp, they tore through the aquila and scored a deep groove in the ceramite plate. Uriel dived forwards, tucking his head and landing on his back, allowing his heavy weight to crush the beast below him.

It refused to die, kicking spasmodically with its legs and biting the back of his helmet.

He hammered his elbow downwards into its face, cracking open the skull and spilling its brains across the icy deck.

Screams and gunfire filled the chamber. Pasanius's flamer lit up the darkness, drawing shrieks of agony from burning aliens. Uriel pushed himself to his feet and staggered in the direction of the bunched Ultramarines. Pasanius had cleared a path through the genestealers with his flamer and the blazing exit was now clear of enemies.

Uriel rejoined his warriors, the pain from his lacerated shoulder flaring bright and hot. Three were down and perhaps double that were injured, but none of those wounded were ready to give up the fight. Together they helped carry the bodies of the dead. No Ultramarine would allow one of his fallen battle brothers to remain in this cursed place.

Uriel was pleased to see that Flavian was not amongst the fallen.

Despite the horrendous losses the tide of genestealers had suffered they were unwilling, or unable, to retreat. Time and

time again, they threw themselves at the Ultramarine's ring of firepower and time and time again they were hurled back, but each time reaching a little closer to the Space Marines.

Pasanius backed from the chamber, hosing the aliens with fire and Uriel could see that the flaming spout drooped a little shorter than before. Pasanius saw this too and shared a look with Uriel.

'We can't go on like this!' shouted Uriel. 'We'll be out of ammunition soon.'

Pasanius nodded curtly. 'I've less than a quarter load left in the canister. I doubt it will see us back to the gunship.'

The Ultramarines fell back from the chamber's entrance, firing through at the genestealers that gathered beyond. Already, Uriel could hear the clatter of claws and talons through the walls as the voracious alien predators sought to encircle them. Could the genestealers know their ultimate destination? Would they be able to cut them off before they reached the Thunderhawk? They may just be aliens, but that did not mean they were without cunning.

'Back to the gunship, double time!' commanded Uriel. 'We don't have time to waste, the charges will be detonating soon!'

Pasanius led the retreat through the hulk, periodically filling the corridor before them with flaming death as they made their way back to the gunship in good order. Every junction and every bend in their route had to be scouted quickly, but thoroughly, lest there be alien killers lurking in wait.

The walls echoed with the sounds of pursuit. Every open duct or ragged pipe became a potential avenue of attack. Most proved empty, but many others did not, shrieking genestealers bursting through to attack as a tide of the chitin-armoured monsters attacked in concert from either side.

Uriel could sense a fearsome cunning in the timing and co-ordination of the attacks. In any military operation, the greatest enemy was confusion and the greatest leaders were those who could effectively co-ordinate their forces. The genestealers attacked in perfect synchronicity, forcing the Ultramarines to

fall back at a much slower pace and Uriel knew that they were running out of time. He checked the chronometer in his visor.

The demolition charges would detonate in less than ten minutes.

'Come on, we have to move faster,' he ordered.

Something heavy dropped from the ceiling, smashing into his back and driving him to the mesh decking.

He lost his grip on his sword, the blade skittering away from him and deactivating. Clawed fingers gripped his shoulder guards and pulled. Uriel felt his back creak under the pressure as it bent backwards. He felt muscles tear and his strengthened bone begin to crack. He twisted his head and, in the flickering shadows cast by the flames of battle, could see the genestealer's talons rise, ready to plunge through his helmet and into his brain.

Uriel twisted desperately, bucking and thrashing in an attempt to dislodge the creature, but its grip was too strong.

He roared with a last show of defiance as a blur of blue armour entered his vision.

Pasanius said, 'Steal this!' and thundered his gleaming bionic fist through the genestealer's skull, smashing it to bloody splinters. He followed up with a vicious kick, spinning the twitching corpse from Uriel's body.

Uriel lurched to his feet, wincing at the strain in his back and torn muscles. He rejoined his men with a nod of grateful thanks to his oldest friend as they continued their retreat to the Thunderhawk.

Eventually they emerged into the organic, pustule-encrusted corridor that led towards the gigantic ice cavern they had landed in, and Uriel had never been so glad to see such a desolate place in his life.

It was then he noticed the decreasing counter in the corner of his visor.

0:06... 0:05... 0:04... 0:03... 0:02... 0:01...

'No...' whispered Uriel.

0:00



**A**S THE ULTRAMARINES neared their escape, the devices planted throughout the hulk by the Tech Marines detonated. Each boxy device was fitted with six kilos of a high explosive compound developed specifically for the destruction of space hulks.

The demolition charges had a wide blast area, and the destructive power unleashed within that area was an order of magnitude greater than almost any other explosive of similar size.

The timer mechanisms had all been calibrated from a single master unit aboard the *Vae Victus* and thus every single bomb detonated within a nanosecond of each other.

The bombs detonated, instantly vaporising an area one hundred metres in diameter with a huge, reverberating thunderclap. The sounds of the massive explosions spread throughout the hulk, and positioned throughout the ship at key structural points, the effects were utterly devastating.

Agglomerated structures tore free from the hulk's side as their supports were blasted clear, ripping gantries and beams with them. All across the *Death of Virtue*, the structural integrity of the hulk collapsed at an exponential rate as the explosive echoes died.

Each demolition charge roared into a seething ball of plasma energy, burning with the heat of a star. Those charges closer to the centre of the hulk, where the internal gravity field was strongest, dropped through the deck, turning the core of the hulk molten as they fell.

Slowly at first, but at a hugely accelerating rate, the hulk began to break apart.



**U**RIEL FELT THE deck shift under his feet and heard the shriek of tearing metal as the corridor began tearing free from the main body of the hulk. The ceiling split and vile fluids poured from the ruptured pustules on the wall,

drenching the Ultramarines in noxious slime.

The screech of metal on metal squealed deafeningly and Uriel was thrown to the floor as the deck rolled sickeningly, ripping from its crudely bolted moorings. The door they had first come through appeared to lurch upwards as the decking dropped away and Uriel saw that they had seconds before it was ripped from the side of the hulk.

'Come on!' bellowed Pasanius, hauling fallen space marines upright. 'On your feet and get moving. That Thunderhawk isn't going to wait forever! Come on!'

The space marines quickly vaulted through the doorway, each warrior turning as he went through to reach back and help the battle brother behind him.

Uriel backed towards the door, casting furtive glances over his shoulder as he kept watch for anything that might attack them from behind. His nerves were stretched taut.

It was impossible to tell whether anything was approaching over the screech of tearing metal and the distant groaning of the dying hulk.

A hand slapped on his shoulder guard and he turned to see Pasanius reaching down towards him with his gleaming and unblemished silver hand. Uriel slung his bolter and gripped the smooth metal of the sergeant's arm before launching himself upwards and through the door.

He rolled upright, grateful beyond words to hear the whine of the Thunderhawk's engines spooling up.

'Time to get going, Uriel,' shouted Pasanius over the din.

Uriel nodded as Pasanius turned and sprinted through the cavern towards the gunship.

The deck rumbled and heaved, shuddering as though in the grip of a powerful earthquake. Ice cracked, raining fine white crystals upon the chamber and stalactites separated from the roof with the crack of gunshots, dropping gracefully to the floor to explode into lethally sharp splinters.

Ultramarines were already boarding the gunship as a yawning chasm split the floor of the ice chamber and gouting jets of steam spewed into the cavern. The buckling floor heaved upwards and Uriel was pitched to the ground. He skidded across the deck, fingers scraping a furrow in the icy floor as he fought to arrest his slide. A stalactite hit the floor nearby, showering him with fragments. Burning vapours blinded him as he felt the deck lurch downwards.

With the last reserves of his strength, Uriel hauled himself upwards, desperately clawing his way up the ice-slick floor. Hand over hand he climbed, rolling clear as the deck section plunged into oblivion. The cavern bucked in the hulk's death throes, falling ice and billowing clouds of steam obscuring everything in a grey haze.

Uriel staggered in the direction of the roaring engines of the gunship as he saw shadowy figures racing alongside him, also heading towards the beacon of noise.

At first he thought they were fellow Space Marines.

Then one leapt at him, scything claws reaching for his throat.

The genestealer's bestial screech was drowned in the howling gale of the jetwash from the gunship that emerged from the smoke. Uriel raised his arm to ward off the blow, feeling the monster's claws tear through his armour and gash his upper arm. Its mid-section arms closed around his waist, and the two foes fell to the deck in a tangle of limbs.

The genestealer's jaws fastened on his helm.

The Thunderhawk's landing gear was up, but Uriel saw the forward ramp was still lowered. The gunship's wing-mounted weapons roared, the noise deafening as heavy calibre shells ripped up the chamber. Genestealers, ice and steel disintegrated under the devastating fusillade as the pilot swung the nose of the gunship left and right.

The creature's hot breath fogged Uriel's visor, thick ropes of saliva splattering him as its jaws snapped shut. Uriel twisted his head and the teeth slid clear, scraping parallel furrows down the side of his helmet.

He rolled atop the thrashing genestealer and gripped its shoulders, using his formidable strength and weight to hold it pinned. Its legs kicked and its upper arms slashed at his armour, ripping one of the shoulder guards clear and raking his flesh.

Uriel rammed his helmet full into the genestealer's face, smashing open its skull. Incredibly, it kept fighting, struggling against his grip. He head-butted the beast twice more, pounding its skull to destruction, then scrambled to his feet, wiping the genestealer's brains from his visor.

The Thunderhawk swayed in the air before him. The pilot fought to hold the craft level in the chaos of the collapsing hulk, its frontal beams stabbing erratically through the smoke.

Uriel leapt for the lowered ramp, digging his fingers into the mesh of the decking. Hands gripped his armour and pulled him inside and he rolled onto his back as he saw Pasanius hammer the door closing mechanism.

'Go! Go! Go!' he yelled at the intercom.

The craft rolled wildly, spilling Ultramarines to the floor as the pilot violently swung the gunship around on its axis and hit the main engines.

Uriel slid backwards, the powerful acceleration hurling the Thunderhawk forwards. He gripped onto a stanchion, the deck rolling and bucking madly as the pilot flew them from the disintegrating hulk. Something hard smashed into the gunship and Uriel heard a tortured scream of metal as it swayed drunkenly to one side.

But then they were clear and the gunship roared away from the hulk, its flight finally becoming level.

Uriel pulled himself upright with a groan and slumped into his captain's chair.

He rested his head against the vision block and stared at the destruction of the hulk. Tongues of flame consumed the massive vessel from within, its structure collapsing as the demolition charges did

their work. He saw streaks of light powering away from the hulk and recognised them as the other two Thunderhawks. He wondered how the warriors aboard them had fared.

He turned away, satisfied that the unholy vessel had been destroyed and that they had accomplished their mission.

Not exactly how they had planned, but accomplished it nonetheless.



**T**HE MOOD ABOARD the *Vae Victus* was sombre as Uriel stood at the tactical plotter with Lord Admiral Tiberius and two frail, green robed astropaths. Both carried simple ebony staffs and both were blind, their eye sockets sealed with black, plasflex hemispheres that just failed to conceal the puckered scar tissue at their edges. The massive viewing bay at the end of the command bridge's nave was still filled with the image of the dying hulk, but none of the strike cruiser's bridge staff paid it any mind.

They had greater concerns now.

'Are you sure?' asked Uriel.

'As sure as we can be, my lord,' answered the oldest of the pair, though it was difficult to judge the age of a psyker accurately. 'Just below the galactic plane, at the edge of perception, a wall of white noise in the ether encroaches. A smothering blanket of psychic interference lurks below us. But it is moving, and it is moving this way.'

Uriel locked eyes with Tiberius and felt a cold dread settle in his soul as he realised the import of the astropath's words.

'The Shadow in the Warp,' said Tiberius tonelessly.

Uriel nodded slowly.

And that could mean only one thing.

'The tyranids are coming.' **U**

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# WARRIORS OF ULTRAMAR

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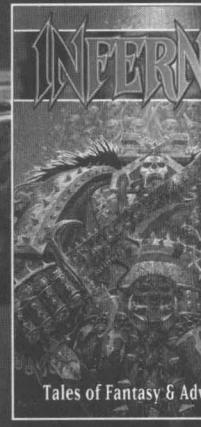
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# GLOW

by Si Spurrier

**A**UTUMN IN Talabheim. Cloying mists rose languidly from sultry canals, stretching ethereal tentacles along streets and alleyways. Wind-banked leaves withered in papery necrosis and fat crows sulked on wet roof tiles, cawing their hungry indignation at the carrion-free cobbles below.

Autumn too, in the slums. A time of shadows and footsteps, rippling puddles and the drip-drip-drip of ill-weathering architecture. A time for unwelcome visitors.

'Should I knock first, captain?'

'Mm. Knock hard, Kubler, if you know what I mean.'

Wood splintered with a resounding crack! Echoes from the blow flitted through the mist; startled crows launched from the rooftops. Dark figures tumbled through a shattered doorway.

'Up! Up! Get up, scum, or by Sigmar's wrath I'll—'

'That'll do, Holst. Our host seems positively catatonic... No sense in dirtying one's boot.'

The invaders' ebony forms seemed almost unreal beside the tattered rags of the building's solitary inhabitant who lay curled uncomfortably on the sagging floorboards, snoring in intoxication. The tallest of the black cloaks, crowned with an austere wide-brimmed hat, squatted athletically to examine the sleeper's mud-smeared countenance.

'Drunk, captain?' another dark figure enquired.

'No... No, I should say not.' The gloved hand rummaged briefly within the shapeless rags and reappeared grasping a crude earthen pillbox. A deft movement

and the box opened to reveal a cluster of green tablets within.

'Hmm.'

'Sleep analeptics, captain? My brother swears by 'em.'

'Perhaps. Apothecary nonsense, of course.' The tall man stood, examining the room. He sighed. 'Turn it over, gentlemen. Anything untoward, I want to know about it.'

Several of the black cloaks stooped to their task, unsettling mould-strewn furniture. Presently another of them turned to the hat wearer with a frown. 'No sign of a Taint, sir.'

'Mm.'

'The heretic yesterday practically screamed the address.'

'I daresay the flames of righteousness will do that to a fellow, Kubler... I don't detect any Dark Powers at work here – just the usual city filth.'

The slumbering form fidgeted with a guttural groan.

'Captain...' one of the cloaks quavered uncertainly, 'h-his eyes!'

The men drew back from the rag-strewn bundle that was suddenly thrashing with comatose fury. Sure enough, its eyes flickered and wept, an unnatural glow ebbing forth from the lidded irises. Bubble-flecked spittle collected in the corner of the man's mouth.

'Hmm,' said the hat-wearer. 'I stand corrected...'

The sleeper lurched to its feet, rough skin bulging and twisting, frothing in a paroxysm of internal anguish. The jaw creaked open in a ghoulish smile; serrated canines erupted from writhing gums like impatient saplings, human tongue curling

in extended, prehensile distortion. And finally the eyes opened fully, a ghastly light smouldering from their scorched sockets. It fixed its vision on the pillbox and reached out a shaking hand.

'G-give... gg...'

The thing made an attempt to articulate, pulsating arteries disturbing its swollen larynx, unfamiliar tongue unable to form sounds easily. 'Give back... guh. Glow. Wwant.'

But the transformation was incomplete, and already the skin was tightening cadaverously, already the ridges of brow and cheek were ossifying further, bony protrusions appearing with tectonic certainty. With a wet snap of elasticity the skin burst from within, peeling back in reptilian folds, splitting like overripe fruit.

'Want it nowwww!' it gurgled, insane eyes rolling. 'Give Glow or I ki—'

*Boom.*

The beast's twisted features dissolved beneath a grisly haze of airborne ichor. A pistol crack shuddered angrily about the room, acrid smoke oozing lazily from the hat-wearer's outstretched weapon.

Time stagnated for one long moment, then returned explosively as the chaotic tumbled downward, ruptured skull spewing viscous fluids that splattered and coagulated across the dismal room. It thrashed and jerked.

'In the name of Sigmar I purge thee,' the hat-wearer intoned, fingers tracing the Holy Hammer in the air.

Reality coalesced. The other Templars, aghast at the suddenness of the creature's transformation – and grateful for their leader's adroit response – breathed again. The corpse twitched then laid still, a sludge of liquefying tissues dribbling from its wound.

A deep silence settled.

One of the witch hunters mumbled, nodding at the pillbox in the hat-wearer's hand, 'Y-you... uh... you still think they're sleep analectics, captain?'

'On balance, Heinrich... I suspect not.'

Witch Hunter Captain Richt Karver squinted at the tablets in his gloved hand and pursed his thin dry lips in thought.

**R**AIN UNFURLED across the city like the casting of a vast net. All across the poor quarter it pelted, shivering along the merchant streets, dousing what scant illumination had been created against the drawing in of the night. The mist dissipated beneath the barrage, puddles formed and ran together, rusted gutters overflowed, cascading their moss striated contents earthwards.

The crows ruffled themselves in self pity, beady eyes scowling at the indignity of such bedragglement.

Even the mighty Temple of Sigmar, implacable in its domination of the brooding skyline, was forced to surrender a fraction of its haughty demeanour to the torrents that assailed its towers and buttresses. And yet deep, deep below that drenched edifice existed a world of stale air and flickering light that no rain could penetrate.

Richt Karver cast off his hat with characteristic aplomb and sank into a straight backed chair. His well polished pistols were hung casually across the furniture's wooden frame, intricately decorated powder bag dumped unceremoniously upon a tabletop and his ebony walking cane – never absent from his side – was twiddled distractedly in his perfectly manicured hands.

'Bring it in,' he muttered after a moment's thought.

The other hunters entered in a gaggle, dragging with them an awkward bundle. Wrapped in stained sheets and bound with what few scraps of crude twine could be plundered from the slum, the oily fluids of the mutant's body were already blemishing the linen.

Karver rubbed his chin for a moment, a habitual motion that his acolytes had learned to recognise as a sign of deep thought, and took pains not to interrupt. 'Let's see what we can find out about this... what did he call it?... ah – "Glow", shall we? Holst, you cover the slums. Loose talk in taverns, that sort of thing. You have the face for it, old boy. Lars, the estates in the west quarter. I daresay these things are equally at home amongst affluence as effluence. Heinrich, see if the militia's heard anything – oh, and take Spielmann

with you, he might learn something. And Kubler, you can find me that little worm Vassek. If anyone knows anything about this it'll be him, you can count on it.'

'Keep your eyes and ears open, gentlemen. Whatever this stuff is, I want it out of my city. Report back when you have something.'

Kubler nodded and hefted the corpse. 'What about this, captain?'

'Little point in burning it in the platz, I suppose.' Karver grumbled. 'Nobody wants to see the Righteous Flames of Purity claiming a heretic who's already dead... Not that we could start a fire in this weather anyway—'

Spielmann, the youngest of Karver's Templars, piped up nervously. 'A spike at the city gates, captain? Haven't been many heads up there recently.'

'Mm,' Karver grunted. 'The displaying of a head does rather require that the body has one. Our unfortunate subject is somewhat lacking in that respect.'

Kubler resettled the shape on his wide shoulder. 'The Heap then?'

Karver nodded slowly. 'Yes. Yes, I suppose so. Seal it carefully, mind you. I think in the spring we'll have to see about clearing it out down there. There must be – what – a dozen bodies festering away, now?'

Holst frowned, 'Don't see why we don't just dump 'em in the river.'

'Because, you idiot,' Kubler snapped, 'we'd end up with a water supply full of tainted flesh. Would you drink it?'

'Can't be wörse than Bretonnian ale,' muttered Karver, dispelling the emerging confrontation with a forced chuckle – but sparing a private nod for Kubler. The boy would go far, Sigmar willing. 'No, I'm afraid that onto the Heap it goes. Recite the Prayer to Banish Uncleanliness at the doorway and we'll be fine. The best kind of dead heretic, gentlemen, is one that stays dead.'

Kubler nodded and dragged the corpse to the head of a convoluted stairway, beginning the descent that would terminate eventually at the vault where the remains of mutants lay putrefying. Karver listened to the gradually fading

percussion of the body being manhandled indelicately until the gloomy depths swallowed the sounds of their passage. The other Templars, perhaps sensing Karver's disquiet, dispersed upon their respective errands in silence.

Karver paused for a moment, then passed through the heavy doorway to his workrooms.



**T**HE CREATURE hissed at his approach, filth-matted hackles rising in a peristaltic wave, short forelimbs bunching with muscular alertness. Its single remaining eye rolled uncontrollably, spastic orbits reflecting the imbalance of the beast's mind.

It leapt with a shriek, slavering jaw gnashing, prominent incisors wielded for action.

Only at the very pinnacle of its lunge, when its jaws seemed inescapable, did the iron chain about its neck jarringly arrest its movement. It lurched to a halt with a pitiable squeal and dropped to the floor, gagging and retching in frustration.

Richt Karver hadn't flinched once.

'And how are we today, my little horror?' he cooed to the vast rat, which scrabbled its dagger claws on the stones as if imagining his hated face within its grasp. 'Not too hungry, I trust?'

He'd captured the creature the previous year – an expedition into the unexplored tunnels beneath the city had resulted in an encounter with the repugnant skaven. The nest had been purified, Sigmar be praised, but not before two of his Templars had been carried, screaming, into the nightmare labyrinths below. He'd purged twenty ratmen in Sigmar's name that day, and captured several more for 'interrogatory purposes'. They'd died, shrieking and cursing, manacled to the walls of the very room that their insane pet now guarded. It gave Karver some small measure of satisfaction to imagine their revolting bodies, defeated and mutilated, rotting away in the Pit far below his feet.

The witch hunter strolled into the ruddy half-light of his workroom, humming under his breath. He sagged into a chair, fingers rapping on the armrest. Presently, he turned to the rat that lurked silent in the shadows by the doorway. It watched him – as always – with a malevolence compounded by cyclopic asymmetry, its single beady eye glistening. The Templar made a decision.

'Dinnertime, vermin...' he trilled, reaching into a pocket for the confiscated pills.



TIME PASSED. Winter reached Talabheim, an icy breath squalling from the north.

The few remaining leaves, already revealing their spidery skeletons to the onset of seasonal decomposition, quit their lofty positions and were borne away by the chill. Puddles crystallised treacherously, the ruts and grooves of cobbled streets no escape from the gathering ice.

The crows shivered and puffed themselves up, miniature spheres of black indignation. They eyed each other distrustfully, aware that a starving scavenger was just as ample a meal to its brethren as any other.

In his workroom, Richt Karver warmed his hands over a well stoked fire and ignored the stream of groans and curses from the nearby wall. The whole place reeked of overcooked meat.

'...rrnnn... nnneed medicine... glow glow glow...'

Karver sighed, pushing the branding iron back into the fire to re-heat. 'Spare me, Villhelm. I have a headache.'

'...glow glow glow...'

Muttering, Karver turned to the figure manacled on the wall. A burn mark already blistering across his chest, the man's contorted form writhed uselessly: swollen muscles spasmed, tumourous growths pock marking his flaccid skin. A dappled blemish coiled colourfully across

his shoulders and chest, just one of the gaudy signs of his Taint.

Unmoved by such alterations, Karver leaned in close. His expression – far from the contempt one might expect – instead mirrored the countenance of a disappointed parent whose child has been disobedient once too often.

'Now come on, Villhelm. You know I don't enjoy doing this to you. Just tell me where you bought those tablets, eh? It's for your own good.'

Such was the sincerity in the Templar's voice, such was the element of concern, that the mutant paused incredulously in its cursing to stare at its tormentor.

At which point Karver placed the firebrand against the creature's flesh and pushed. Smoke rose, flesh curled and charred and the Chaos-thing screamed and screamed and screamed. The pain overcame it rapidly; its jagged head sagged forwards in a dead faint.

Karver returned to warming his hands, grumbling quietly to himself: 'A bit of bloody quiet, Sigmar be praised.'

It didn't last.

Within moments there came a thumping at the door and a muffled voice beyond. In the gloom of its alcove, the chained rat slunk to its feet.

'It's me, captain – Kubler!' came the call. 'I've found Vassek! I've got him right here!'

'Very good, Kubler. Send him in, please.'

The door inched open slightly and unseen hands propelled a small, greasy man into the room. Karver mentally placed himself in the sweaty individual's unenviable position as first reactions were gauged.

The smell hit him first; assailing his nostrils, the miasmic stench of charred skin made him gag and spin on his axis, whereupon he was faced with the limp mutant, hanging scarred and smoking from the wall. Attempting to repress the biliousness that rose in his belly at such horrors, the man twisted away and sunk to his knees...

Coming face-to-face with hissing, snarling death.

The rat had changed. Since the autumn, when its diet of Glow had begun in earnest, a dreadful transformation had occurred. Now its one eye glowed with an internal fire, no longer rotating with insane misdirection. Its lank fur hung loose and decaying in infected strips, the corpulent flesh beneath glistening in decay. Weird ridges and sores pockmarked its ulcerous skin and its long tail had sprouted a forest of spines in between the weeping lesions that punctuated its length.

It opened its cadaverous mouth and shrieked in the small man's face, straining against its chain.

Vassek DuWurz emptied his bladder and blubbed like a baby.

Karver hauled him upright and dumped him bodily in an empty chair, where he sat quivering with eyes like dinner plates.

'Hello, Vassek.' The hunter smiled, his friendliness utterly incongruous with his dismal surroundings. 'We've been looking for you for quite a while. How have you been?'

'D-damn you, Karver! What's all this about?'

'I just wanted a chat, really. It's so rare that I get to see old friends, these days.'

'Don't start that! Don't start that "friendly" rubbish! I've been down here before. Remember? I know the routine!'

'Oh, come now! I'm too much maligned, old fellow. Surely a conversation isn't too much to ask?'

'Too bloody right, it is! Unless you've a reason for keeping me here, I'm leaving right no—'

There was a cold, metallic hiss. Vassek, suddenly frozen, examined the glittering blade that had materialised at his throat. Karver's ebony cane lay hollow on the floor, its secret contents exposed.

Karver's voice was quiet, but no less friendly. 'How's that... what did you call it last time we met.... that "birthmark", Vassek? Covers half of your back, I seem to recall. Most unusual.'

'J-juhst a... hkkk... buhhthmrrk!...' the porcine man choked.

'Mm. Maybe. It's funny, you know, how many of my, ah, "patients" say that.'

'Whtt d'y wnnt?' Vassek burbled.

'Ah, that's more like it...' Karver smiled happily, releasing the pressure on the quivering man's throat. 'That's much more like it.' He settled back into his chair, delicately fingering the blade. 'I know you like to... how can I put this?... "listen" to things, Vassek. Now that we're friends again, how about you tell me everything you've heard about this.'

In his hand lay a pile of Glow tablets. Over by the door, the rat-creature began howling and hissing, straining at its chain. Vassek shuddered in horror.

Karver winked conspiratorially, 'Oh, don't worry about him – he just wants his supper. Between you and me... I think he has an addiction problem.'



**K**ARVER STRODE from his workshop purposefully, buckling on his pistol belt. The other Templars jerked to informal attention.

'We have an address!' he exclaimed, donning his hat with a theatrical flourish. 'Come, come, gentlemen! We have holy work to attend to!'

'Sir! You trust the word of that maggot?' Kubler grunted, nodding towards Vassek, who was edging his way past the snarling rat-beast.

'Oh, there's no harm in him... He keeps poor company – but he remembers things and seems, now at least, keen to keep me informed... I dare say he's more use to us at large, as it were. Let's reacquaint him with the outside world, shall we? We have far greater fish to fry! Besides... I think Herr DuWurtz knows only too well what'll happen if we can't trust him.'

In a tangle of billowing black fabric, dragging Vassek DuWurtz behind them, the Templars passed from the catacombs like a malignant storm cloud.



**D**ESPITE THE filth and the poverty, the people of the city's working quarter walked with heads held high. Possessed of a ridiculous quality of embittered imperiousness, their indomitable pride glimmered in their demeanour. We may be poor, their expressions contrived to announce, but by Sigmar we'll not show it!

This was a world of starched clothing, of saving-up-for-a-rainy-day, of keeping up appearances, and of fierce, unconditional piety.

In the lowliest of places does Sigmar find his champions, thought Karver with a sad smile, passing along the cobbled streets. He hated entering this district – not out of any great distaste at wallowing in conditions below his station, but rather for the reactions that such visits earned. These people weren't witches or heretics, they'd sooner kill themselves than invite the Taint into their disinfected little world – and yet still they lowered their gaze, still they clutched at their hammer pendants silently, still they sweated in cold, guilty fear at the passing of a witch hunter.

These people didn't deserve to be afraid of him, Karver knew, and he hated himself because they were.

The Templars passed into a side alley, leaving the wide eyes and the whispers behind. They gathered around their leader, who nodded towards an ill fitting door at the alley's end. 'There.'

'They have such fear of us,' Spielmann whispered, peering back over his shoulder at the thronged street, where already rumours would be breeding and accusations cast.

Karver smiled sadly. 'Mm. You'll quickly learn that fear can be a powerful weapon, my boy. Then again, it can also be a great hindrance. An innocent man has no need to fear the Templar's knock upon his door, but he fears it anyway... What, then, is the hunter's other greatest weapon?'

Spielmann's smooth features contorted in uncertainty, cheeks already blushing red. Holst sniggered and hefted his pistol, caressing its barrel.

'Put it away, Holst,' Karver muttered, one exquisite eyebrow arching. 'A man who reveres such clumsy things has no

right to them in the first place. No, Spielmann? Any ideas, the rest of you? The teacher-to-class routine came easily, and Karver, in his secret soul, basked in his acolytes' reverence.

'Kubler? I daresay you know the answer.'

Kubler thought for a moment, then nodded. 'A templar's greatest weapon, captain – besides fear – is an open and smiling face.'

'Correct. The man who is reticent when threatened may well be loose tongued in the face of simple friendliness.'

Holst spat in disappointment. He preferred his gun.

Karver went on with a flourish, 'The Templar must be, above all else, a gentleman! He walks with poise, is polite at all times and strives to bring light – be it the light of purity, of truth, or of refinement – into places of darkness.' The Templars, in varying degrees of understanding and accordance, nodded.

'Look at Kubler, if you will.' Karver grinned, reinforcing his point and embarrassing his star pupil in one deft move. 'He's clean – well, mostly clean – his boots are well shined; why, his face is so open one could walk through it and exit the other side!' The Templars sniggered, enjoying the street theatre. Karver could sense their anxiety at the forthcoming raid and knew exactly how to coax their relaxation. 'See here,' he said, pointing at Kubler's ebony-swathed chest, 'he even wears a brooch in his buttonhole! Quite the Bretonnian court dandy today, isn't he?' Karver's gloved hand darted out and snatched up the bauble, inspecting its bright emerald surface. 'A most exquisite jewel too, I'd say. Where did you find it?'

Kubler squirmed, clearly uncomfortable with the attention, 'I... ah... I bought it, sir. Got it from a peddler up in the platz. All different sorts, she had.'

'Well next time you visit your peddler, my boy, you be sure to purchase enough of these trinkets for all of us, you hear?' Smiling benignly, Karver handed the token back to Kubler. 'And now gentlemen,' he nodded, twiddling his cane, 'if we've all quite finished admiring this blushing model of Talabheim sophistication, what do you say to a little exercise?'

An element of apprehension returned to the group; but Karver could sense their calm professionalism. It was an altogether better prepared squad that turned as one towards the door at the foot of the alleyway.

Karver drew his pistol.

*Boom.*

A flare of light and a vicious geyser of smoke.

The decayed timber erupted in a maelstrom of whirligig splinters and corroded bolts. Messily bisected planks slumped mournfully in their dislocated bindings, the dismal light from beyond the ruined door spilling into the gloom within.

Dust motes capered in a flurry of concentric eddies as a gloved hand, ebony sleeve avoiding snags on the jagged wood, hastily reached into the room and tore back the deadbolt holding the door closed.

In the darkness someone – or something – moaned dolefully.

The door lurched open, hinges squealing in protest at the twisted wreckage of their load. Cold air rushed into the room like the surge of a broken dam, and again something within keened to itself.

Richt Karver strode into the gloom, pistol in one hand and swordstick in the other. Squinting into the shadows, he braced himself for whatever evils might be lurking within – tensing the muscles of his leading leg, preparing for combat.

Nothing moved.

Accosting him from the cloying darkness was an exotic melange of herbaceous aromas, strange and tantalising scents, carrying with them visions of distant lands and wondrous flora. Holst spat, shattering the silence. 'Stinks like a privy in here.'

Rows of bundled herbs hung drying from the ceiling, an inverted forest of miasmic odours. The chamber – poorly lit as it was – looked for all the world like an apothecary's workroom.

Again came that low murmuring moan, and instantly the Templars tensed, weapons levelled, eyes desperate to penetrate the darkness. Karver cocked his head, owl like, attempting to locate the source of the sound. Gradually, like a sundial's shadow point, he pivoted around

the room, coming to rest with all his formidable attention focused upon a wide, flat topped cabinet.

'Show yourself,' he growled.

Something moved fractionally in the gloom, curled under the low top of the table. It began to draw itself upright, tattered rags hanging around it like dead flesh, a distinct metallic chiming accompanying its stiff movements. A heavy hood shadowed the thing's face, a few errant strands of blond hair hanging loose.

Quivering, it groaned horrendously. The Templars spread out across the room, blocking the twitching creature's escape.

'Come out in the open,' Karver grunted. His command was ignored. Frowning, Karver slowly lifted a leg and stamped down hard on the floor. The resulting thump had the desired effect.

Like a startled rodent, the hooded head snapped around to regard the black clad apparition blotting the light from the door.

'Muua...' it gurgled.

'Come out into the open,' Karver repeated, gesturing with his pistol. 'Understand?'

Again, a moment of recognition – perhaps even a half nod – and Karver felt sure that he could hear the thing breathing, sharp, panicked intakes of breath.

And then, with lightning rapidity the figure twisted to reach for something hidden from view beyond the cabinet. Karver felt a hot rush of adrenaline pulsing through him, senses surging ahead so that glacial slowness seemed to clutch at his movement.

'Weapon!' yelled Kubler in astonishment. All around the room the Templars were reacting, eyes wide – slow, too slow!

Karver didn't even think. His finger tightened fractionally on the trigger and the world went white.

Only when the echoes of the pistol crack had fled from the chamber did time appear to flow freely again. Dry fragments of cloth capered briefly in the air, blown clear of the shambling figure by the force of the impact. The creature itself had folded away neatly: no whalespout of chaotic fluids

followed its descent, no mad thrashing of limbs and gnashing of teeth. It collapsed with a strangled yelp, the clink of metal upon metal, and lay still.

Karver inched forwards cautiously. Finally convinced of its death, he stooped to peel back the ragged hood. He instantly understood his horrible mistake.

It was a girl – perhaps twelve – and she had been insane.

Her eyes betrayed her madness; not the volatile, explosive insanity of the Taint, but rather a wide eyed horror, an expression of untold hardships barely endured that had robbed her of her sanity and replaced it instead with an endless fount of terror.

Her lips were open in a silent moan, betraying the mutilated flesh within.

'Her tongue's gone,' he murmured quietly.

And then, with morbid curiosity, Karver allowed his eyes to travel along her outstretched arm to whatever she had been twisting to grab in her final moments of life. Cold reflected light on metal glimmered beneath the rags festooning her frailty, and, horrified, Karver understood his error.

A thick manacle was set around her bruised and bloody leg – a manacle securing her, by means of an iron chain, to an immovable stanchion cemented into the floor. She had been reaching to expose the chain – a mute explanation for her inability to comply with Karver's order to move out into the open.

This girl had been a prisoner. A voiceless innocent, mutilated and abused by her captor, held here for who knew what reason.

And Karver had killed her. He felt sick.

'Get out,' he hissed, teeth grinding together.

'But s-sir,' Lars stammered, 'you couldn't have kno—'

'Get out.'

Exchanging glances, the hunters withdrew, leaving their leader with the grim trophy of his error. Hunched over, he closed his eyes and hissed a litany, forcing down the bile in his stomach.

'...Sigmar forgive... Sigmar forgive...'

Silence sank gradually into the room. Slowly, precariously, struggling all the way, Karver allowed a sense of resolution into his mind. Witch hunters were predators. They weeded out the weak and the defective and felt no remorse at the execution of their holy work: holy work, Karver knew, that could brook no inner guilt. No guilt! – a commandment that shrieked through his skull and demanded acquiescence.

He'd killed before. Oh, countless times. So many bodies gathered at his feet, so much blood spilled on his polished boots, so many vengeful bullets fired in Sigmar's name. How many fires had he lit in the communal platz? How often had he heard screams of denial turn to anguished, meaningless shrieks of admission in the stygian dungeons of the Temple?

Compared to such overwhelming carnage – he lied smoothly to himself – what did the accidental extinguishing of one tiny, innocent life truly matter?

Something happened to Richt Karver's eyes, then. A minor change, to be sure, but a change nonetheless. Some fractional glimmer within his steely blue irises dimmed, hardened with new crystalline certainty, and when finally he straightened it was a minutely different man who arose.

The echoes of an ancient text rattled in his mind – a fragment of dialogue, written by some long dead bard, recited in the dry lecture halls of his youth.

*I am in blood stepped in so far, that should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as to go o'er.*

All trace of sentiment removed from his bearing, Karver peered about the room intently, halting his gaze upon the surface of the cabinet. Piled carefully upon a stone tile, surrounded by pestles, mortars and racks of spherical tablet moulds, lay a pyramid of finely formed powder. Well within reach of the girl, the Templar noted, bending to scrutinise the substance.

Nodding with newfound certainty, he glanced about for a container. Nothing seemed available – the room was as spartan as it was gloomy – and Karver grimly peeled off one leather glove and, careful not to touch it with his bare skin, scooped a portion of the powder inside.

Then he ran his gaze around the chamber quickly, dipped his hat in farewell as if to cauterise whatever wounds festered therein, and stalked out into the cold city.



**T**HE VENERABLE Herr Ehlbeck – Graduate of the College of Magic in Altdorf; Initiate of the Jade Order; specialist in herbology; much sought after purveyor of balms and healing potions – tugged on his beard and fumed quietly to himself.

Around him graceful glass vessels bubbled and boiled, fluted beakers frothed in multicoloured agitation and thick smoke was shooed through an open window by a gaggle of fan wielding assistants. A flickering flame turned from yellow to green, coating the sorcerer's eyeglasses in an oily frosting and causing him to sneeze explosively. He felt positively light headed – which only added to his growing sense of indignation – and murmured a quick incantation to ward off the intoxicating effects of the vapour.

The cheek of the man! Storming in without so much as a by your leave! Stomping around, knocking over equipment, making demands as if he were the Supreme Patriarch himself! And then, having delivered a justifiable refusal to cooperate with this madman, to have been threatened by him; a Practitioner of the Secret Arts, threatened like some low-born thug in a tavern! It was too much to bear!

Ehlbeck forced down an image of that decorative pistol being thrust forcibly into his rosy swollen nose and told himself that the only reason he'd relented was to get the odious man out of his workshop.

Contenting himself with considering what cutting responses he could have supplied had he wanted to, Herr Ehlbeck bent down to his task with all the false bravado of a man who knows he's been defeated but refuses to acknowledge it.

**I**N AN ADJOINING chamber, Richt Karver slumped on an uncomfortable bench and attempted to relax. As defender of Sigmar's Inviolable Faith the very notion of relying upon the suspect talents of a wizard seemed questionable. He'd balked when the idea first came to him, but after a forced inspection of the facilities he was as convinced as he could be that no Taint existed here. The ease with which the frail old man had been terrorised had been most gratifying.

The various other citizens sitting patiently in Ehlbeck's waiting room had long since dispersed, with as much nonchalance as they could muster. The presence of a witch hunter was more than enough to dissuade them from pursuing the incantations and healing potions they sought. In such small ways was the sanctity of Sigmar preserved.

Eventually Herr Ehlbeck came bustling from his workroom, green robes flowing behind him and snagging clumsily on the assorted twigs and branches festooning the room. He came to rest before Karver – who regarded him dispassionately – muttering excitedly to himself and fiddling with his eyeglasses, all former hostility forgotten.

Finally, twitching like a rodent and tapping his fingers together, he turned to Karver. 'Where... ah..... where did you find this powder?'

'I don't think that's really any of your concern,' Karver responded. 'Is it Glow?'

'Oh- Oh yes. No doubt about that, I mean, I compared the powder with the tablet form exhaustively. Exhaustively, I say. Same results, all the way through, bam-bam-bam, just like that. Definitely the same stuff. Whatever it is.'

'And what is it?'

'Ha. Quite.' The wizard scratched his nose distractedly, 'I was rather hoping you might tell me, actually...'

'Listen.' Karver grunted, annoyed. 'This... substance, whatever it is, am I correct in assuming it to be some physical form of-'

'Magic?' The wizard breathed, eyes twinkling behind his glasses. 'Oh, absolutely. Mixed with all sorts of herbs, of course, but essentially it's... well... I'd go

so far as to say that if Chaos' and here Ehlbeck noted Karver's narrowing eyes and added quickly: 'thrice damned that it is, of course - if Chaos were distilled into material form, then this would be the result.'

Karver glared acerbically at Ehlbeck for a moment. Men had died burning in the platz for showing less of an interest in the Taint than this skinny little bundle of nerves before him, but it occurred to him that a tame wizard was perhaps a valuable resource... 'Mm.' he grunted eventually. 'Chaos dust, eh?'

'Haha - quite,' the wizard laughed nervously. Karver treated him to a glance of unequivocal disdain.

'Very well.' The Templar muttered to himself, 'I suppose I must discover where the wretched stuff comes from...' He nodded perfunctorily at the wizard - the only thanks the venerable man would get - and turned to leave.

'There... ah... there is one other thing...' Ehlbeck said, polishing his glasses distractedly. 'Whilst I was conducting the tests, I... well, that is to say... I was a touch... distracted by the tenseness of the situation and, ah, to start with I tested the wrong thing...'

Karver's eyes narrowed. 'Go on.'

'Well, you see... Y-you asked me to test the powder in the glove against the Glow tablet, yes? Um, whereas, t-to start with, I tested the specks I found on the glove. I-I realised my mistake quickly and repeated the test on the stuff inside - w-which are the results I've been giving you - but, you see, it wouldn't have made any difference anyway because the stuff on the outside was exactly the same, chemically speaking.' The old man was twittering now, embarrassed at his mistake.

'The powder on the glove?' Karver repeated, perplexed.

'Y-yes. Just a few green fragments. Quite pretty, in fact, haha. Um.'

'I didn't touch any powder. I scooped it up inside.'

The wizard shrugged wretchedly, desperate to get the terrible man away from his premises.

'Mm,' Karver grunted again, and then stepped through the door into the street.

As he walked, he thought. And as he thought, a revelation began to form.



**A** DARK PLACE. A place where no light ever penetrated, save the sputtering, tortured firebrand placed carefully in a corner. Its limited luminescence served merely to stress the depths of those dark corners it failed to penetrate.

Something moved. Someone hunkered close down to the uneven floor of the chamber, hefting energetically at something corpulent and foul, from which the last vestiges of lank fur hung in sparse clumps, putrefaction peeling back its skin in thick gelatinous folds. The man, unconcerned by the dead fluids oozing from the vile corpse, thrust a hand deep into the folds of cloth wrapping that wrapped it. His fingers found a worn leather pouch and pushed deep inside, snatching up a handful of green jewels from within, glowing with hypnotic beauty in the gloom.

The man giggled, emptying the warpstone into his pocket. He'd lost one Glow producing slave, certainly - but there were others. Other terrified children, snatched away in the night, forced to labour in hidden workrooms, terrified into compliance. Production would continue. The money would flow. The Taint would spread.

The man walked upon a floor of rotting corpses, collecting his malevolent harvest.

The fire flickered in its alcove.

And then some subtle sense, not wholly natural, made him jerk upright. Something was comi-

The door ripped open like a thunderclap and something reared in the doorway, billowing like a storm cloud, ebony undulations coursing through its extremities. Despite himself, the man in the dark moaned in fear.

*Boom.*

The lead shot hit him in the chest and sent him crashing to the floor. He gasped in pain and began to shudder, uncontrollable spasms rippling across him. Gradually the pain subsided.

Blood coursing down his chin, the man smiled revoltingly.

'How did....gkkh....you know?'

The storm cloud stepped into the room, robes settling, and the light threw Richt Karver's features into gruesome relief. 'The brooch,' he growled. 'I took it from your buttonhole, remember? It left a trace.' The hunter held a leather glove between pinched fingers, flinging it disgustedly to the floor.

'Hehehekkgh...' Kubler chuckled, coughing more blood. 'A nice touch, I thought. Hidden in plain sight, like you always say.'

'Arrogance, Kubler.' Karver grimaced, shaking his head, smoking gun still levelled. 'I can't begin to tell you how disappointed I am.'

'Spare me the lecture, old man... kkh... let's not pretend I'm one of your bloody smiling gentlemen anymore, eh? You made me drag those skaven bodies down here last year. Remember that? It would've been such a waste to leave them rotting without checking for... heh... valuables.'

'It's twisted your mind, Kubler. That stuff. It's made you insane.'

'Hekkh. Is it so wrong to make people feel... hnnk... happy? You should try some Glow, old man. You never know - heh - you might like it.'

Kubler coughed, more blood dribbling thickly from his lips.

'You're dying,' Karver intoned, pistol unwavering. His calm exterior required an effort to control. Inside, he howled at the betrayal, raging against his own weakness for not noting the Taint seducing his disciple sooner.

'Isn't... nn.... isn't everyone?' Kubler chuckled, lugubrious breaths growing more and more strained. He pushed a quivering hand into his pocket and extracted a pillbox, clicking it open. 'Such... hkk... such pain.... w-wouldn't begrudge me my medicine, would you?'

'Kubler...' Karver warned, too late. The dying Templar, fluids draining across the Heap like a warm slick of oil, upended the box. Green spheres rattled lightly against his teeth. He swallowed heavily, gagged on air for a moment, then slowly, clumsily, sagged. His face froze, lips drawn back, blood oozing across slick teeth.

And then he moved. Fast. Twisting impossibly, rising vertically in one long, terrifying lurch. Karver's hand blossomed with pain and the pistol skittered away into the dark, echoing.

Kubler stood back and leered. With a creak his jaw ratcheted forwards, his brow sloped back in a graceful arc and his eyes snapped open to reveal a yellow iridescence below. His neck distended noisily, the vertebrae concealed below rising like swelling bruises in a series of fluted spines. His fingers flexed then began to writhe, curling back onto themselves like a fistful of pink, fleshy maggots.

'Sssssssssssssss...' the thing hissed through a rapturous smile. Its features were slipping away to be replaced by new and deadlier forms, its skin writhed, its patterning moulded. Kubler's body shivered and jerked, a humanoid representation of amorphous, viscous, and constant change.

It moved with the effortlessness and speed of lightning, and before his eyes registered any attack Karver was bleeding, thrown back against the embrasure of the thick doorway with a long gash across his arm.

'U-unclean thing!' the Templar stammered, aware of the blood oozing across his clothing. 'Sigmar damn you!'

The creature smiled, and when it spoke it was still Kubler's voice - soft and undemonstrative - that left its wormlike lips. 'Oh, please, captain. I think we can dispense with that... Don't feel too bad - it's a poor novice that fails to excel his master.'

The sword was flung away, clattering against the wall in a flurry of sparks and shattering metal. Karver, consciousness beginning to ebb with the flow of blood from his wound, barely even saw the creature move.

And then it advanced, reptile sneer the only constant upon a face of writhing parts. Karver reached out to the wall for support, feeling blindly into the darkness of the stairwell outside the catacomb, every movement agony.

'Mmmm...' Kubler trilled. 'Stagger away, old man. Where are your lessons now? Eh? Where's your faith? It's about time you realised, "captain"... You've nothing left to teach me.'

Karver's quivering hand fell upon a cold metal hook, cemented into the wall of the stairwell. His questing fingers - growing weaker with every heartbeat - encountered a thick loop of chain, planted over the stanchion. He grinned feebly. 'I've a lesson or two left in me yet, my boy.'

Then he pulled the chain, straining against its placement, off the hook.

The rat barreled from the shadows of the stairs like a comet. Trailing its own useless guts, discarding flesh and flaccid fur in its magnificent arc, gimlet eyes glowing in anticipated victory. Kubler never knew what hit him.

Starving and insane, chained there in the shadows moments ago, it had been treated to a perfect view of the writhing figure within the chamber consuming enough of what it wanted, what it must have, to last it a lifetime.

It struck Kubler at waist height and dug.

Kubler's amorphous form reacted admirably - seething around the invading monstrosity, spreading forth tentacles to seal up the crater into which the beast had vanished, rocking as it attempted to ascertain what damage might have been caused.

Kubler's grin froze, and then vanished. His eyes bulged. His fingers flexed.

He sank to his knees and doubled up, a slow but enormous retch building in his throat.

Richt Karver, weak and barely conscious, opened his eyes and forced himself to watch.

Like volcanic forces long dormant reaching a critical pressure deep within the living earth, Kubler erupted.

His chest cavity detonated, mutant flesh flexing and palpitating in the air, shattered bone scything outwards, fabric and reptile skin hanging limpid in stunned clouds around the fragmenting form.

Kubler - or, rather, the thing that had once been him - gave a final disbelieving giggle and died.

The rat-creature tumbled from the organic wreckage, body hopelessly shredded, sliced and dissolved by whatever internal attacks Kubler's doomed innards had attempted in its final moments. The fierce light of triumph burnt in its one remaining eye, and - unaware that its viscera were long gone, it gobbled hungrily upon the semi-digested Glow that Kubler had swallowed.

'Dinner time, vermin...' Karver whispered. Then he snatched up the firebrand and tossed it onto the Heap.

Months old bodies, mummified by the dryness of their subterranean tomb, ignited like paper. The rat screamed as it died, and Karver watched it until it stopped, too charred to draw breath any longer.

He sat on the stairs of the Heap until the others arrived in a gaggle of excitement and confusion. He sat until the fire burnt itself out, leaving nothing but soot and ash. He sat until every last trace of Kubler - his greatest novice, his greatest enemy - had been obliterated.

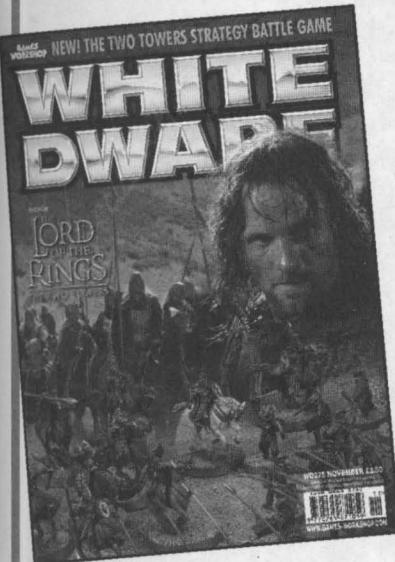
He was trying to decide how he felt. Somehow he understood that deep, personal grief would be the natural response to this episode. Further, he felt that - until recently - his reaction to this situation would have been just that.

But not any more. Too much had changed.

Sitting there on the step, surrounded by devastation and death, Richt Karver - Witch Hunter Captain of Talabheim City - was fighting the urge to grin in triumph.

Outside, in the bitter air, the crows ruffled their feathers against the cold and waited for spring. ♦

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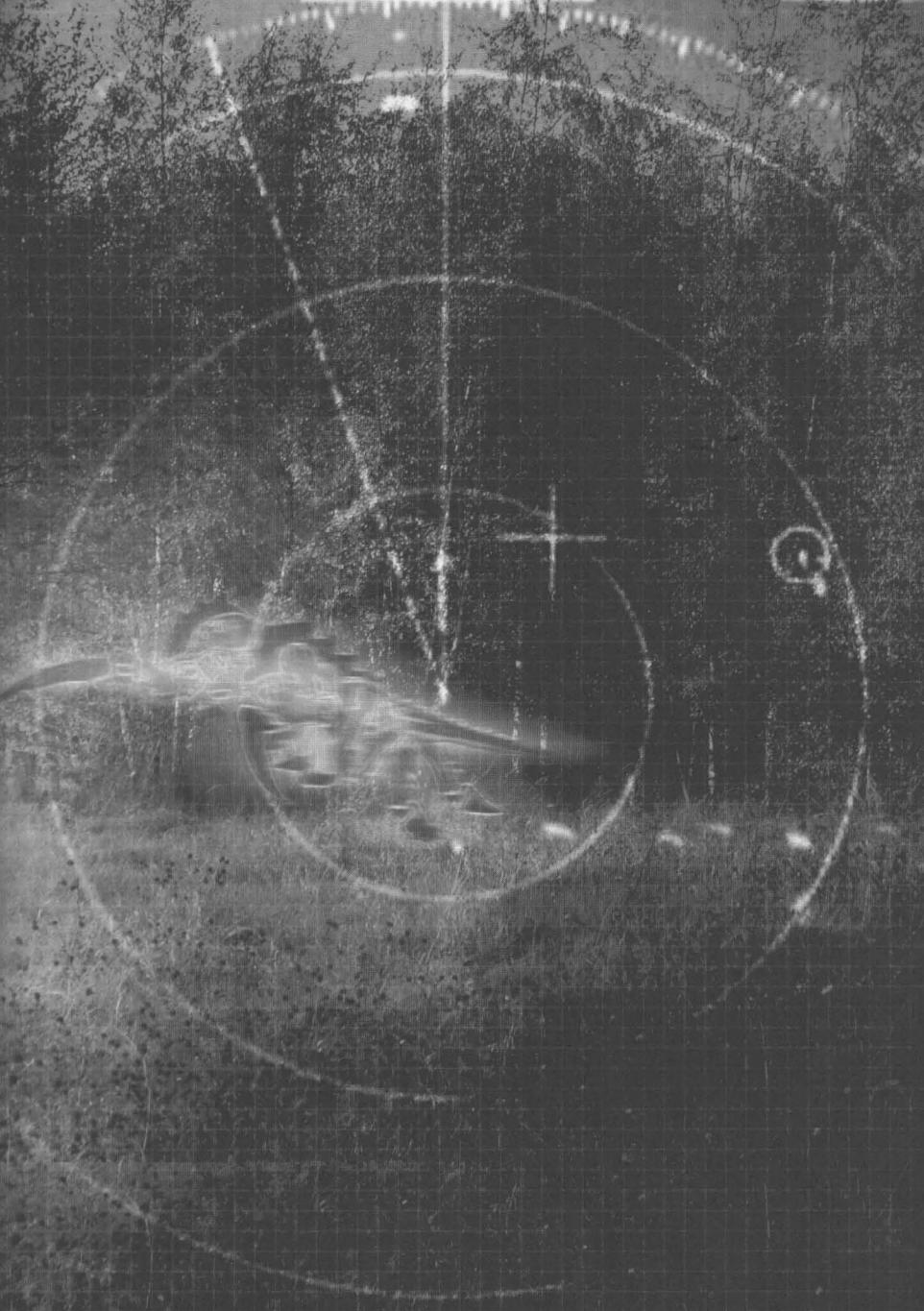
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# THE CURIOSITY

DAN ABNETT

HE WAS, it is fair to say, already weary of Gershom when the curiosity came to light. Seven years is a long time in any man's career, seven years living and working in grubby tenements, backwater hostels and frontier habs all over the planet. Long enough to feel like a native, and certainly to look like one, although he had been born forty-two years and many million AU distant. The patched worsted suit with shiny, calloused elbows, the slate grey weathercoat, fingerless leather gloves, wire-framed spectacles, the skin of his face etiolated from too many short, wintry days, his thin hair unnaturally black from a biweekly chemical treatment that he purchased and applied himself.

This insipid and forlorn figure stared at his own refection from the smoked glass screen of the demograph booth.

'Present papers. State name and occupation,' the indistinct form behind the screen said. As he spoke the words appeared in glowing, block-capital holos on the glass.

He put his crumpled documents into the bare metal drawer below the screen and it gobbled them away with an un-oiled clatter. Hunching low, he aimed his mouth helpfully at the vox grille, and said 'Valentin Drusher, magos biologis.'

'Purpose of travel?' the voice said, subtitled as before.

'I am a magos biologis, as I said. You'll see I have a permit for travel to Outer Udar stamped by the office of the Lord Governor. He is my patron.'

The shape behind the tinted glass panel paused and then the legend 'PLEASE WAIT' appeared on the screen. Doing as he was told Drusher stood back, rubbing his hands together briskly to chafe warmth into them. It was a miserably early morning in the last few days of autumn and the terminal was vacant. Outside, it was not yet light; the sky

was a patchy blue, the colour of a Tarkoni tarkonil's winter plumage, and the orange glare of sodium lamps reflected in the puddles on the rain-slicked concourse. Drusher studied the reflections and they reminded him of the fluorescent banding on the abdomen of the southern latitude glowmoth, *Lumenis gershomii*.

The air held the bitter foretaste of another hard Gershom winter closing in. He consoled himself with the thought that he would be long gone before winter came. Just a few more days to tidy up this annoying loose end and then he would be done at last.

The drawer slot clacked open again, his refolded papers laid inside.

'Proceed,' said the voice.

Drusher retrieved his papers, gathered up his bags and equipment cases, and walked down into the boarding yard to find himself a seat on the interprovince coach.

It wasn't hard. The vehicle, a converted military gref-carrier from the Peninsula, was all but empty. An old woman in a purple shawl sat alone, fingering rosary beads as she read from a dog-eared devotional chapbook. A young mother, hard-faced and tired, occupied another bench seat, her two small children gathered up in her skirts. A rough-faced agri-worker in leather overalls nodded, half-asleep, one arm protectively around the baskets of live, clucking poultry he shared his seat with. His hound, lean and grinning, prowled the aisle. Two young men, identical twins, sat side by side, motionlessly intent. Drusher set himself down near the front of the cabin, far away from anyone else. He shooed the dog away when it came sniffing at his bags.

A hooter sounded, waking the agri-worker briefly. The coach's big, caged props began to turn and beat, and the patched rubber skirts of the bulky ground-effect vehicle began to swell out. Drusher felt

them drunkenly rise up. One of the little children laughed out in glee at the bobbing motion as the vehicle picked up speed.

Then they were out of the city terminal and roaring up to the state highway, fuming spray into the gloomy dawn.

Outer Udar, the most western and — many said — the most heathen of Gershom's provinces, lay far beyond the Tartred Mountains, forty hours away.

For the first hour or two, he worked on his notes, refining technical descriptions on his data-slate. Such polish was simply cosmetic. He'd been over it a hundred times and the taxonomy would have been published as complete by now. Complete but for the curiosity.

He put his slate aside and took the crumpled voxgram from his pocket, hoping yet again that it was a mistake.

Seven years! Seven damn years of rigorous work. To miss a sub-form of tick-fly, a variant weevil, even a divergent rodentae, well that would just be the way of things. Even, he considered, some class of grazer, if it was localised and sufficiently shy in its habits.

But an apex predator? Surely, surely not. Any systematic taxonomy identified all apex predators in the initial phase of preparation by dint of the fact they were the most obvious of any world's creatures.

No, it was a mistake. The curiosity in Outer Udar was an error. He'd stake his reputation on that.

The rolling motion of the gref-coach began to lull him. He fell asleep, dreaming of the characterising mouthparts of filter snakes, the distinguishing feather-palps of lowland locustae, and the bold, striated beaks of peninsula huskpeckers.



**H**E WOKE TO the sound of infant laughter. The coach was stationary, and sleet was dashing against the grey windows. Blinking, he sat up, and repositioned his dislodged spectacles on his nose. At his feet, the two children had his sketchbooks laid open and were giggling as they surveyed the hand-painted images of beasts and fowls.

'Please,' he said, 'please be careful with those.'

The children looked up at him.

'Zoo books,' said one.

'Yes,' he replied, taking the sketchbooks away from their grubby hands and closing them.

'Why have you got zoo books?'

'I make zoo books,' he said.

They thought about this. Their simple grasp of professional careers did not reach so far. One nudged the other. 'Are you going to put the beast in your zoo books?' the nudged one asked.

'The beast?' he asked. 'Which beast?'

'The hill beast. It has teeth.'

'Great large teeth.'

'It eats men up.'

'And swine.'

'And swine. With its great large teeth. It has no eyes.'

'Come away!' their mother called, and the two children scurried back to her down the aisle.

Drusher looked around the cabin. It was just as he had last seen it. The agri-worker continued to snooze; the old woman was still reading. The only change was the twins, who now sat facing one another, like a mirror.

The cabin door thumped open and flakes of sleet billowed in around several newcomers. A black-robed demograph servitor, its face a cluster of slack tubes beneath augmetic compound eyes. A short-haired woman in a leather body-glove and fur coat, carrying a brown paper parcel. Another agri-worker, his face chillblained, fighting to keep his long-haired terrier from snapping at the roaming hound. A matronly progenium school teacher in a long grey dress. The short-haired woman helped the matron with her luggage.

'Leofrik! This is Leofrik!' the servitor called as he walked the cabin. 'Present your papers!'

Each voyager offered up his or her documents for the servitor to scan. Gershom was very particular about its indigents, the side effect of being so close to a war zone. The Departmento Demographicae maintained a vigilant watch on the planet's human traffic.

The servitor, waste spittle drooling from its mouth tubes, took a long time studying Drusher's papers.

'Magos Biologis?'

'Yes.'

'Reason for travel?'

'I went through all this at the terminal this morning.'

'Reason for travel?'

Drusher sighed. 'Seven years ago, I was commissioned by the Lord Governor of Gershom to draw up a comprehensive taxonomy of the planet's fauna. It is all but complete. However, a curiosity has appeared in Outer Udar and I am travelling there to examine it.'

Drusher wanted to go on. To talk about the extended deadlines he had been forced to request, the increasingly reluctant project funding that had obliged him to take the overland coach instead of a chartered flier, the preposterous idea that he might have missed an apex predator.

But the demograph servitor wasn't interested. It handed the papers back to Drusher and stalked away.

In the meantime, the short-haired woman had taken the seat opposite him. She smiled at Drusher. Her face was lean and sturdy, with a tiny scar zagging up from the left hand corner of her lip. Her eyes were dazzling amber, like photoluminescent cells.

Drusher looked away.

'Magos biologis?' she said.

'Yes.'

'I couldn't help overhearing.'

'Apparently.'

The servitor had dismounted. With a lurch like sea-swell, the gref-carrier rose and got underway again.

'I was told you were coming,' she said.

'What?'

The woman reached into her fur coat – highland fox, if he wasn't mistaken – and produced a wallet which she flipped open to reveal the golden badge inside.

'Germaine Macks, province arbites.'

'You were expecting me, officer?'

'A squirt from the Governor's office. An expert on his way. I'm thrilled, of course. It's about time. So, what's the plan?'

'Plan?'

'Your m.o.?'

Drusher shrugged. 'I suppose I'll examine habitat, look for spores, collate cases and get a decent pict or two if I can.' His voice trailed off. In seven years, no official had ever taken such interest in his work.

'And how do you plan to kill it?' she asked.

'Kill it?' he echoed.

'Yes,' she said, chuckling, as if party to some joke. 'That being the point.'

'I don't intend to kill it. I don't take samples. Just descriptive records, for the taxonomy.' He patted his sketchbooks.

'But you have to kill it,' she said, earnestly. 'I mean, if you don't, who the hell will?'



**B**Y THE FIRELIGHT of the great hearth, Baron Karne went on expansively for several minutes.

'The Lord Governor is a personal friend, a childhood friend, and when he makes it known that a scholar such as yourself is coming to my part of the world, I take pains to make that scholar welcome. Ask, and it will be given, magos. Any service, any requirement. I am happy to provide.'

'Th-thank you, baron,' Drusher said uneasily. He looked about the room. Trophy heads, crested with vast antlers and grimacing their fangs, haunted the shadowy walls. A winter storm battered at the leaded windows. Outer Udar was colder than he had dared imagine.

'I wonder if there might have been a mistake...' Drusher ventured.

'How is that?'

'Sir, I am a taxonomist. A scholar. My expertise is in the cataloguing of faunafoms. The Lord Governor – your childhood friend, as you say – commissioned me to compile a concordance of Gershom's animal life. I've come here because... well, there seems to be a curiosity out here I may have missed. A predator. I'm here to identify it for the taxonomy. Not kill it. I'm no hunter.'

'You're not?'

'Not at all, sir. I sketch and examine and catalogue.'

The baron bowed his head. 'Dear me... really?'

'I'm truly sorry, sir.'

He looked over at the door into the dining room. It was ajar and light slanted through.

'What will I tell them?' the baron said.

Drusher felt desperately out of his depth. 'If you have guests - I mean, to save face - I could play along, I suppose.'



**A**ROUND THE long candlelit table were nineteen local lairds and their ladies, the rotund Bishop of Udar and his secretary, and a square-jawed man with sandy-white hair and piercing eyes. His name was Skoh. Drusher wasn't entirely sure who Skoh was. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure of anything anymore. The baron introduced him as 'that expert from the city I've been promising'.

'You are a famous hunter, then?' the bishop asked Drusher.

'Not famous, your holiness. I have some expertise in the line of animals.'

'Good, good. So claims Skoh here, but in three months, what?'

'It is a difficult beast, your honour,' Skoh said softly. 'I'd welcome some expert advice. What weapon do you favour, magos? Hollowpoint or shot? Do you bait? Do you use blinds?'

'I... um... favour multiple means, sir. Whatever suits.'

'Aren't you terribly afraid?' asked one of the ladies.

'One must never underestimate the quarry, lady,' Drusher said, hoping it conveyed an appropriate sense of duty and caution.

'They say it has no eyes. How does it find its prey?' asked the bishop.

'By scent,' Drusher replied emphatically.

'Not so,' snapped Skoh. 'My hunters have been using sealed body sleeves. Not one sniff of pheromone escapes those suits. And still it finds them.'

'It is,' said Drusher, 'a difficult beast. When was it last seen?'

'The thirteenth,' said the baron, 'Up in the ridgeway, having taken a parlour maid from the yard at Laird Connok's manse. My men scoured the woods for it, to no avail. Before that, the swineherd killed at Karla. The waterman at Sont's Crossroads. The two boys out late by Laer's mere.'

'You forget,' said one of the lairds, 'my potman, just before the killings at the Mere.'

The baron nodded. 'My apologies.'

'The beast is a blight on our land,' said the bishop. 'I tell say to you all, a speck of Chaos. We must rally round the holy aquila and renounce the dark. This thing has come to test our faith.'

Assenting murmurs grumbled around the table.

'Are you a religious man, magos?' the bishop asked.

'Most certainly, your holiness.'

'You must come to worship at my temple tomorrow. I would like to bless you before you begin your bloody work.'

'Thank you, your holiness,' Drusher said.

The outer door burst open, scudding all the candle flames, and a servant hurried in to whisper in the baron's ear. Baron Kearne nodded, and the servant hurried out again. A moment later, Arbites Officer Macks was standing in the doorway, dripping wet, a riot-gun over one arm. Her badge was now pinned to the lapel of her leather body suit.

She looked around the room, pausing as she met Drusher's eyes.

'Deputy,' said the baron, rising from his seat. 'To what do we owe this interruption?'

'Another death, lord,' she said. 'Out by the stoops.'



**T**HE ACREAGE TO the north of Baron Kearne's drafty keep was a low swathe of marshy ground given over to poultry farming. Through the sleetin rain, thanks to the light of the bobbing lamps, Drusher could make out row upon row of stoop-sheds constructed from maritime ply and wire. There was a strong smell of mud and bird lime.

Drusher followed the baron and Officer Macks down boarded paths fringed by gorse hedges. With them came three of the Baron's huscarls, lanterns swinging from the tines of their billhooks. The weather was dreadful. Ice rain stung Drusher's cheeks numb and, as he pulled his old weathercoat tighter around him, he longed for a hat and a warm fox-fur jacket like the one Macks wore.

There was an odd wobbling noise just audible over the drumming of the rain. Drusher realised it was the agitated clucking of thousands of poultry birds.

They reached the stoops, and trudged up a metal-mesh walkway between the first two shed rows. The bird-dung stink was stronger now, musty and stale despite the rain. Teased clumps of white feathers clogged the cage wire. Macks said something to the baron and pointed. A flashlight beam moved around up ahead. It was one of Macks's junior arbites, a young man by the name of Lussin, according to his quilted jacket's nametag. He looked agitated, and extremely glad to see company at last.

The frame door to one of the stoop sheds was open; Macks shone her light inside. Drusher caught a glimpse of feathers and some kind of metal cylinder lying on the floor.

He followed Macks and the baron into the stoop.

Drusher had never seen a dead body before, except for that of his Uncle Rudiger, who had died when Drusher was a boy. The family had visited his body in the chapel of rest to pay their respects and Uncle Rudiger had looked normal. Asleep. Drusher, with a child's naiveté, had quite expected his uncle to jump up and laugh in their faces. Uncle Rudiger had been a great one for practical jokes.

The body in the poultry stoop wasn't about to jump up or do anything. It was face down, thankfully, its limbs draped in a contorted, awkward way that wasn't a practical joke. This was one of the baron's farm staff, apparently, a yeoman called Kalken. He'd been doing the night feed, and the metal cylinder Drusher had seen was Kalken's grain-hopper, lying where he'd dropped it in a pile of spilt maize.

Macks knelt down by the body. She looked up at Drusher and made a little jerk with her head that indicated he might want to go outside again. Drusher stuck his hands in his coat pockets resolutely and stayed put. With a shrug, Macks turned the body over.



'ARE YOU ALL right?' Macks said.  
**A** 'What?'  
'Are you all right?'

Drusher opened his eyes. He couldn't remember leaving the stoop, but he was outside in the rain again, leaning against the barn opposite, his hands clenched in the wire mesh so tight he'd drawn blood.

'Magos?'

'Y-yes,' he stammered. 'I'm fine.' He thought it likely that he'd never forget what he'd just seen. The awful flop of the rolling body. The way a good deal of it had remained behind on the muddy floor.

'Take a few deep breaths,' she said.

'I really am fine.'

'You look pale.'

'I'm always pale.'

She shrugged. 'You might as well stay here,' she added, though Drusher felt she'd said it less out of concern for his nerves and more because she knew he wasn't particularly useful. 'I'm going to make some notes in situ.'

'There were bites,' he said.

'Yes,' Macks replied. 'At least, I think so.'

'Measure them. And examine the bite radius for foreign matter. Tooth fragments that might have lodged in the bone. That sort of thing.'

'Right,' she said and turned away.

'Where did it get in?' he called after her.

'What?'

'Where did it get in? Was the cage door open?'

'No. He'd fastened it behind him when we found him.'

'Can I borrow a flashlight?'

Macks got a lamp-pack from Lussin and gave it to Drusher. Then she went back into the stoop with the baron to begin her grisly inspection properly.

Drusher began to walk away down the length of the stoop run, shining his torch in through the cages on either side.

'Don't roam too far, sir!' one of the huscarls called out after him.

Drusher didn't answer. He wanted to roam as far as he could. The thought of being anywhere near that bloody, dismembered mess made him shiver. He was sweating despite the winter gale.

Ten metres down, near the end of the row, he found the wire cage roof of one of the stoops had been torn wide open. Drusher played the torch around. He was near the end fence of the poultry compound, a three metre timber pale topped with a barbed and electrified string of wires. He could see no hole in the fence or damage to the deterrent wires. Had the beast cleared the wall itself? Quite a leap. There was no sign of spore in the thick mud at his feet. The rain was washing it into soup.

He let himself into the ruptured stoop and examined the torn wire roof. With the rain splashing off his face, he reached up and yanked part of it down, studying the broken ends with his lamp closely.

It wasn't torn. It was cut, cleanly, the tough wire strands simply severed. What could do that? Certainly not teeth, not even teeth that could take the front off a man's face and body. A power blade, perhaps, but that would leave signs of oxidisation and heat-fatigue.

As far as he knew – and there was no man on Gershom better qualified – there wasn't an animal on the planet that could leap a three metre security fence and slice open reinforced agricultural mesh.

Drusher took out the compact digital picter he always carried and took a few snaps of the wire for reference. It came through this cage roof, he thought. Probably landed on it, in point of fact, coming over the fence, cut its way in... and then what?

He looked around. The covered timber coop-end of the shed was dark and unforthcoming.

It suddenly occurred to him that whatever it was might still be there.

He felt terror and stupidity in roughly equal measures. He'd been so anxious to get away from that terrible corpse and prove he

was good for something, the blindingly obvious had passed him by.

It was still here. It was still right here in the shadows of the coop-box. Once the idea had entered his brain it became unshakable fact. It really was there, just out of sight in the gloom, breathing low, gazing at him without eyes, coiling to pounce.

He backed towards the cage door, fumbling for the latch. He could hear it moving now, the rustle of straw, the crunch of dried lime on the box's wooden floor.

Dear God-Emperor, he was going to – 'Drusher? Golden Throne! I nearly blasted you!' Macks emerged from the coop-box, straw sticking to her wet hair. She lowered her riot-gun.

'What are you doing here?' she asked. 'I was... looking for... traces...' he said, trying to slow his thrashing pulse. He gestured up at the torn cage roof.

'You'll love this then,' she said, and led him into the stinking darkness of the coop-box. The floor was littered with dead poultry, feathers glued to the wallboards with blood. The smell of offal was overpowering and made him gag.

Macks shone her flashlight at the end wall, and showed him the splintered hole in the timbers.

'It came in and went right down through the row of stoops, smashing through each dividing wall until it found Kalken,' she said. She'd come back along that route to find Drusher. The holes were easily big enough for her to get through.

'Killed everything in its path,' she said. 'Hundreds of roosting birds.'

'But it didn't eat anything,' he observed, struggling to overcome his nausea. 'It slashed or bit its way through, but there's no sign of feeding.'

'That's important why?' she asked.

He shrugged. He took shots of the splintered holes with his picter, and then got her to hold the light steady while he measured the dimensions of each hole with his las-surveyor.

'Have you told anyone?' he asked her.

'Told anyone what?'

'The truth about me? About what I am?'

She shook her head. 'I didn't see any point.'

'The baron knows,' he told her.

'Right.'

There was movement outside, and he followed her out of the stoop. Skoh was coming down the walkway through the rain. He'd changed into a foul-weather suit, and was hefting what looked like an autolaser, though Drusher was no expert on weapons. It had a big, chrome drum-barrel, and was so heavy it was supported by a gyro harness strapped around his torso. An auspex target-lens covered his right eye like a patch.

'You've seen the body?' she asked him.

'Yes. My men are sweeping the wood behind the fence.'

'It came right through here,' she said, indicating the run of stoops.

Skoh nodded and looked at Drusher, as if expecting some expert insight from him. When none came, Skoh left them without a word and continued on down the path.

'Who is he?' Drusher asked.

'Fernal Skoh? He's a freelance hunter. Game specialist. The community hired him and his men when it became clear I wasn't up to the job.' There was rich contempt in her voice.

'The bishop doesn't think much of him,' Drusher said.

Macks grinned. 'The bishop doesn't think much of anyone. Skoh's not had much success so far, despite his flashy rep. Besides, the bishop has his own man on the job.'

'His own man?'

'Gundax. You'll meet him before long. He's the bishop's bodyguard. Tough piece of work.'

'Doesn't the bishop think Skoh can get the job done?'

'I don't think anybody does any more. The baron's threatening to withhold Skoh's fee. Anyway, Skoh's not the bishop's sort.'

'What?'

'Skoh's ungodly, according to his holiness. His background is in bloodsports. The Imperial Pits on Thustathrax.'

**D**RUSHER'S REPOSE was fractured by lurid dreams of bodies that left steaming parts behind when they rolled over. In the small hours, he gave up on rest, and got out of bed.

He'd been given a room on an upper floor of the keep. It was terribly cold, and the wind and rain rattled the poorly-fitted shutters. Drusher got dressed, activated a glow globe, and stoked some life into the portable heater. By the light of the globe, he spread out his equipment and note books on the table and distracted himself with study.

There wasn't a land predator in Gershom that even approximately fitted the evidence. Prairie wolves from the western continent, *Lupus cygnadae gershami*, were rapacious enough, but their pack mentality meant they were unlikely to be lone killers. The great mottled felid of the peninsula taiga, sadly almost extinct, had the bulk and power, and could well have cleared the fence, but neither it nor a prairie wolf would have cut wire that like. And either would have fed.

Besides, Macks had given him her scribbled findings. There was no foreign matter in the poor yeoman's wounds, but she'd made an estimation of the bite radius. Fifty-three centimetres. Fifty-three!

No wolf came close. The biggest radius Drusher had measured for a felid was thirty seven, and that had been from a skull in the Peninsula Museum. All the biggest cats were long dead now.

The only thing that came close was *Gnathocorda maximus*, the vast, deep ocean fish. But this was Outer Udar. There were no wolves here, no forest cats, and certainly no sharks on the loose.

He looked at the pict he'd made of the holes in the stoop walls. It was hard to define from the splinter damage, but it looked like each gap had been ripped open by a double blow, each point descending diagonally from the upper corners. Like a man slicing an X with two swords.

And what was all this talk about it having no eyes?



**L**YAM GUNDAX'S eyes were dark and close together. He was a tall, massively muscled man with a forked beard and braided black hair. Drusher could smell his body-sweat, a scent like that of an animal.

'Who are you and what do you want?'

It was early in the day. The rains had slowed to a drizzle, and the land was dark under a grey sky. Outer Udar was a wide skirt of rocky uplands and black forests around the dismal horizon.

Drusher had come to the cathedral only to find his way into the nave blocked by the big, fur-clad Gundax. The bishop's man was decorated with bead necklaces and wrist-straps, heavy with polished stones, charms, Imperial symbols and animal teeth.

'Gundax! Come away!' the bishop called out, as if calling off a dog. He wobbled into view as Gundax stepped back.

'Drusher, my dear child,' the bishop greeted him. 'Pay no attention to my rogue here. This is the magos Biologis I told you about,' he told Gundax.

Gundax nodded curtly, his leather smock creaking. His charm beads clattered against each other.

'Walk with me,' the bishop told Drusher.

They plodded side by side down the nave. Drusher made a few admiring remarks about the temple's towering architecture and glorious stained glass work.

'This is a hard parish,' said the bishop. 'Hard and hardy on the edge of beyond. Of course, I'm not complaining. I serve the God-Emperor in whatever capacity he calls on me to perform. And here is as good as any.'

'The Emperor protects,' Drusher said.

'He doesn't seem to be doing that so much here these days,' said the bishop. 'It weakens the faith. I have a tough enough time instilling virtue and belief into the weather-beaten folk of this blasted land, and this beast... it saps every ounce of fibre.'

'It must be difficult, your holiness.'

'Life is difficult. We rise to our tests. But, my dear magos, I fear for the spiritual life of this community almost as much as I fear for its flesh and blood. This thing... this beast... it is not an animal. It is a test of faith. An emissary of chaos. For it to roam here, unchecked also shows that disbelief may roam here likewise. In every sermon I

preach, I declaim as much. The beast is a sign that we have fallen away and allowed taint into our souls. To kill it, to cast it out, we must first reaffirm our faith in the Golden Throne.'

'You make it sound simple, your holiness.'

'It is not, of course! But this beast may be a blessing in disguise. Ultimately, I mean. If it makes us renew our belief and our trust in the absolute sanctity of the aquila, then I will offer thanks for it in time. Only in true adversity may a congregation find its focus.'

'I commend your zeal, bishop.'

'So... do you have any leads? Any expert insight?'

'Not yet, your holiness.'

'Ah well, early days, Come, let me bless you and your work.'

'Your holiness? One thing?'

'Yes, Magos?' said the bishop brightly, halting in his tracks.

'You said the beast has no eyes. In fact, that seems to be the popular conviction.' Drusher paused, remembering the words of the child on the coach.

'No eyes, indeed! No eyes, that's what they say.'

'Who, your holiness?'

The bishop paused. 'Why, the folk of Outer Udar. It is what they know of it.'

'I was of the understanding that no one had actually seen this thing. Seen it and survived, I mean.'

The bishop shrugged. 'Really?'

'I know of no eye-witness. No one can offer any sort of description. No one knows the form or size of this thing. Of course, we can make guesses. We know it has teeth from the wounds it delivers, and from that I can estimate the size of the mouth. We know it is small enough to pass through a man-sized hole. And, I fancy, it has shearing claws or talons of some considerable size. But other than that, there is no certainty of its form or nature. And yet... everyone seems certain it has no eyes. Why is that, do you think?'

'Tattle,' smiled the bishop. 'Tavern talk, fireside yap. You know how people invent things, especially if they know nothing and they're afraid. I'm sure it has eyes.'

'I see,' said Drusher.

'Now, come and receive my blessing.'

Drusher endured the short blessing ritual. He didn't feel any better for it.

'I WOULD appreciate your collaboration, magos,' said Fernal Skoh. Drusher raised his eyebrows and hesitated, then let the hunter into his chambers. It was late afternoon, and an ice-wind was rising in the north.

Skoh, dressed in a leather body-glove reinforced with mail links and segments of plasteel armour plate, entered Drusher's quarters in the keep and looked around.

Drusher closed the door after him.

'A drink?' he offered.

'Thank you, yes.'

Drusher poured two glasses of amasec from the flask in his luggage. Skoh was wandering the room. He paused at the table, and looked down at Drusher's spread-out mass of notebooks, dataslates and jottings. Skoh carefully leafed through one of the sketch books, studying each water-colour illustration.

Drusher brought him his drink.

'This is fine work,' said Skoh, making an admiring gesture towards the sketches. 'Truly you have a good hand and a great eye. That grazer there. Just so.'

'Thank you.'

'You're no hunter though, are you, Drusher?'

The question took Drusher aback.

'No,' he admitted.

'That's fine,' said Skoh, sipping his drink. 'I didn't think so. You're just one more fool caught up in this mess.'

'I hear you worked the Imperial Pits.'

Skoh looked at Drusher cautiously. 'Who's been talking?'

'Deputy Macks.'

Skoh nodded. 'Well, it's true. Twenty-five years I worked for the arena on Thustathrax as a procurer.'

'What's that?'

'I was paid to travel the wilder worlds of the Imperium trapping and collecting animal specimens to fight in the arena. The odder, the more savage, the better. It brought the crowds in if we had something... unusual.'

'Something like this beast?'

Skoh didn't reply.

'It must have been interesting work. Dangerous work. That's why the bishop doesn't like you, isn't it?'

Skoh managed a small smile. 'The arenas of the Imperial Pits are ungodly, according to his holiness. I was employed by a secular entertainment industry that revelled in bloodletting and carnage. I am, to him, the lowest of the low. And an outsider to boot.'

'What did you want, Skoh?' Drusher asked.

'The baron tells me my fee will be forfeit if I fail to make a kill soon. I have wages to pay, overheads to consider. This job has dragged on. I can kill this beast, Drusher, but I can't find it. I think you can. Help me, and I'll pay you a dividend of my earnings.'

'I'm not interested in money,' said Drusher, sipping his amasec.

'You're not?'

'I'm interested in two things. An end to this slaughter and a personal closure. I was hired to produce a complete taxonomy of this planet's fauna. Now, at the eleventh hour, I seem to have a new apex predator on my hands. If that's so, it will throw my entire work into disarray. Seven years' work, you understand?'

'You think this is an apex predator that you've missed?'

'No,' said Drusher. 'Not even slightly. There'd be records, previous incidents. This is either a known predator gone rogue and acting abnormally or...'

'Or?'

'It's an exotic.'

Skoh nodded. 'You've been here a day and you're that certain?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Do you have supporting evidence?'

'It doesn't match anything I've turned up in seven years. And it doesn't feed. There is no sign of appetite or predation. It simply kills and kills and kills again. That's the behaviour of a rogue animal, a carnivore that's no longer killing due to hunger. And it's the behaviour of a creature alien to this world. May I ask you a couple of questions?'

Skoh set his empty glass down on the table. 'By all means.'

'Why do they say it has no eyes? Where did that rumour come from?'

'All I know about that is that the lack of eyes is a regular feature of the bishop's hellfire sermons. I presumed it was

hyperbolic invention on his part, which has fallen into common rumour.'

'My other question is this: you know what it is, don't you?'

Skoh looked at him. His eyes pierced right through Drusher.

'No,' he said.



**B**Y DAWN THE next day, there had been another death. A swine herder out beyond the crossroads had been killed in the night, and twenty of his saddlebacks along with him. Drusher went out into the sparse woodland with Skoh, Macks, Lussin and two of Skoh's huntsmen.

The air was cold and ice-fog wrapped the hillside. It was ten below. At the swine farm, the bodies of hogs and hogherd alike had frozen into the mud of the pens, their copious blood making ruby-like crystals.

In the steep thorn scrub above the swine farm, Drusher stopped the group and handed out the cartridges he'd prepared the night before.

'Load them into your shotguns,' he said. 'They won't have much range, I'm afraid.'

Macks and Lussin had arbites-issue riot guns. Skoh had made sure his men had brought short action pump-shots along with their heavy ordnance. Both huntsmen, like Skoh, were weighed down with torso rigs supporting massive autolasers.

'What are these?' Lussin asked.

Drusher broke a cartridge open to show them. Little chrome pellets were packed inside in a sticky fluid suspension.

'Trackers,' he said. 'Miniature tracker units. They have a two thousand kilometre range. I usually use them for ringing birds. In fact I plotted the migration patterns of the lesser beakspot and the frigate gull *Tachybaptus maritimus* over a three year period using just these very—'

'I'm sure you did a great job,' snapped Macks. 'But can we get on?'

Drusher nodded. 'I've packed them in contact adhesive. If you see anything — anything — then you mark it.'

They made their way up the thorny scarp and entered a stretch of black-birch woodland. Thanks to the fog, the world had become a shrunken, myopic place. Unaided visibility was twenty metres. Stark and twisted black trees hemmed them in, gradually receding into the white vapour. The earth was hard, and groundcover leaves were brittle with frost. The obscured sun backlit the fog, turning the sky into a glowing white haze. Skoh spread the group into a wide line, but still close enough for every person to be visible at least to his immediate neighbour. Drusher stayed with Macks. There was an uncanny stillness, broken only by the sounds of their breathing and movement.

Drusher was bone-cold. Macks, wearing a quilted arbites jacket, had leant him her fox-fur jacket, which he wore over his own weathercoat. His breath clouded the air.

'Do you have a weapon?' she asked.

He shook his head.

She slid a short-pattern auto-pistol out of an underarm rig, checked the load, and handed it to him grip first.

He looked at it uncertainly, as if it was some new specimen for collation. It had a brushed-matt finish and a black, rubberised grip.

'The safety's here, beside the trigger guard. If you have to fire it, hold it with both hands and aim low because the kick lifts it.'

'I don't think so,' he said. 'I've never been a great one for guns.'

'I'd feel better if you had something.'

'You wouldn't feel better if I shot you by accident, which is likely if you let me loose with something like that.'

She shrugged and put it away again.

'Your funeral,' she said.

'I do hope not.'

They walked on another kilometre or two. Skoh and his hired hands had auspex units taped to the their forearms, scanning for movement.

'What was the time of death, do you reckon?' Drusher asked.

Macks pursed her lips. 'Four, four-thirty? The bodies had a residual core temperature.'

'So three or four hours ago?'

The chance of anything still being around seemed very slim to Drusher. Given the Beast's hit-and-run habits, it would be long gone by now. But the cold offered possibilities. It had set the soil hard and solid. Tracks might remain. Drusher kept his eyes on the ground.

They went across open fields, thick with rime, and along the basin of a wooded dell where the fallen leaves had frozen into a slippery mat. The fog was actually beginning to disperse, but down in the hollow it was as thick as smoke. Butcher birds, jet black and armed with shiny hook-beaks, cawed, clacked and circled in the treetops.

Drusher suddenly heard an extraordinary noise. It sounded like an industrial riveter or a steam-powered loom. A puffing, pneumatic sputter interlaced with high pitch squeals.

Macks started to run. Her vox-link crackled into life.

'What is it?' Drusher called, hurrying after her.

He heard the noise again and made more sense of it. One of Skoh's men had opened fire with his autolaser.

He scrambled through the frosty ground-brush, trying to keep up with Macks's jogging back as it slipped in and out of sight between the tree trunks. Twice he went over on the frozen rug of leaves, scraping his palms.

'Macks! What's going on?'

More shooting now. A second weapon joining the first. Stacatto *puff-zwip-puff-zwip*.

Then the dreadful, plangent boom of a shotgun.

Drusher almost ran into Macks. She had stopped in her tracks.

Ahead of them, in a narrow clearing between leafless tindletrees, Skoh lay on his back. It looked like his chest and groin was on fire, but Drusher realised it wasn't smoke. It was steam, wafting up from wretched wounds that had all but eviscerated him. His heavy weapon and part of its gimbal-rig had been torn off and were lying on the other side of the clearing. Huge clouts of fused earth had been torn out of the ground and two small trees severed completely from the fury of his shooting.

'Throne of Terra...' Macks stammered.

Drusher felt oddly dislocated, as if it wasn't actually happening. They walked together, slowly, towards the body of the hunter. He still had his pump-shot clamped in his hand. The end of the barrel was missing.

Macks suddenly swung left, her riot-gun aimed. One of Skoh's men stood on the other side of the clearing, half-hidden by a tree and only now visible to them. He wasn't actually standing. His body was lodged upright by the tree itself. His head was bowed onto his chest, the angle of the tilt far, far greater than any spine should allow. Macks approached him tentatively, and reached out a hand. When she touched him, he sagged sideways and his head flopped further. Drusher saw that only the merest shred of skin kept it attached to the rest of the body.

Drusher was overcome with heaving retches and he wobbled over to the thickets to throw up. Lussin and the other huntsman stumbled into the clearing while he was emptying his stomach.

'Did you see anything?' Macks barked at the other men.

'I just heard the shooting,' Lussin moaned. He couldn't take his eyes from Skoh's awfully exposed entrails.

'That's it, then,' said the hunter. He leaned back against a tree trunk, and clutched his head in his hands. 'Damn, that's it then.'

'It's got to be close! Come on!' Macks snapped.

'And do what?' the hunter asked. 'Two of them, with turbo-lasers, and they didn't kill it.' He nodded to Skoh's body. 'That's my paycheck gone. All my dividends.'

'Is that all you care about?' Lussin asked.

'No,' said the hunter, 'I care about living too.' He took out a lho-stick, lit it and sucked hard. 'I told Skoh we'd wasted our time here. Stayed too long. He wouldn't admit it. He said he couldn't afford to cut our losses and leave. Screw it. Screw him.'

The hunter straightened up and dragged on his smoke-stick again. 'Good luck,' he said and began to walk away.

'Where the hell are you going?' Macks demanded.

'Where we should have gone weeks ago. As far away as possible.'

'Come back!' cried Lussin.

The hunter shook his head and wandered away into the fog. Drusher never saw him again.



**W**HAT DO WE do?' Lussin asked Macks. She was prowling up and down, fists clenched. She growled something.

'One of them got a round off, with a shotgun,' Drusher said. His voice was hoarse from vomiting and his mouth tasted foul.

'You sure?' Macks snapped.

'I heard a shotgun,' Drusher said.

'I didn't,' said Macks.

'I think I did... maybe...' Lussin murmured softly, rubbing his eyes.

'Get an auspex!' Macks ordered. Drusher wasn't sure who she was speaking to, but Lussin didn't move. Reluctantly, Drusher approached Skoh's body, trying not to look directly at it. He crouched down and started to peel away the tape that secured the compact scanner to Skoh's left gauntlet.

Skoh opened his eyes and exhaled steam. Drusher screamed, and would have leapt back if the hunter's left hand hadn't grabbed his wrist.

'Drusher...'

'Oh no... oh no...'

The hand pulled him closer. He could smell the hot, metallic stink of blood.

'Saw it...'

'What?'

'I... saw... it...' Thin, watery blood leaked from Skoh's mouth and his breathing was ragged. His eyes were dull and filmy.

'What did you see?' asked Drusher.

'You... were... right, Drusher... I... I did... know what... it was... suspected... didn't want... didn't want to say... cause a panic... and anyway... couldn't be true... not here... couldn't be here...'

'What did you see?' Drusher repeated.

'All the things... I've tracked... tracked and caught in... in my life... for the Pits... you know I worked for the Pits...?'

'Yes.'

'Never seen one... before... but been told... about them... you don't mess with... don't mess with them... don't care what the... the Pits would pay for one.'

'What was it, Skoh?'

'The Great... Great Devourer...'

'Skoh?'

The hunter tried to turn his head to look at Drusher. A torrent of black blood gushed from his mouth and nostrils, and his eyes went blank.

Drusher tore the auspex from the dead man's forearm and got to his feet.

'What did he say?' Macks asked.

'He was raving,' said Drusher. 'The pain had taken his senses away.'

He swept the auspex around and tried to adjust its depth of field. He was getting a lot of nearby bounce from the trackers that had gone wide and pelted the ferns and tree boles.

Two contacts showed at a greater range. Two of the glue-dipped teleplugs anchored to the hide of something moving northwest, just a kilometre and a half away.

'Got anything?'

'Yes. Come on.'

Macks was clearly considering taking one of the heavy turbo-las weapons from the corpses, but that would mean touching them.

'Right,' she said. 'Lead on.'

'Macks?'

'Yes?'

'Maybe I should borrow that handgun after all,' Drusher said.



**T**HEY HURRIED through the frozen woodland, following the steady returns of the auspex. The fog was burning off now, and the heavy red sun was glowering down, casting a rosy tint across the iced wilderness.

When they paused for a moment to catch their breaths, Macks looked at the magos.

'What?' she asked.

'I was just thinking...'

'Thinking what?'

'Skoh was looking for this thing for months. State of the art track-ware, qualified help. Not a sign. And then, today...'

'He got unlucky. Damn, we all got unlucky.'

'No,' said Drusher. 'If you were the beast... wouldn't today be a good day to turn and take him out? It was his last serious try. He's coming out with a magos biologis at his side, changing tactics. Using taggers.'

'What are you saying, Drusher?'

Drusher shrugged. 'I don't know. It's... convenient, I suppose. This thing is quick and sly enough to do its evil work and stay right out of harm's way. By the time a killing is discovered, it's long gone. Today, we had the best chance yet of catching it. And what does it do? It changes its habits entirely and turns on us.'

'So?' asked Lussin.

'Almost like it knew. Almost like it was concerned that a magos biologis and an experienced tracker might have enough skill between them to pose a realistic threat.'

'It's just an animal. What did you call it? An apex predator.'

'Maybe. But it's what a man would do. A fugitive who's evaded capture this long, but hears that the search for him has stepped up. He might decide the time was right to turn and fight.'

'You talk like you know what this thing is, Drusher,' said Macks.

'I don't. It doesn't fit into any taxonomy I've studied. It doesn't fit into any Imperial taxonomy either. Except maybe classified ones.'

'What?'

'Come on.' Drusher stood up and hurried on through the copse.



THE AIR-MILL had been derelict for fifty years. Its weather boards had fallen away and the sails of its wind-rotor were flaking. The district had

processed its flour here, before the cheaper mass-production plant had opened in Udar Town half a century ago.

Drusher, Macks and Lussin edged down through the chokes of weed brush towards the rear of the ruin. The tracker tags had been stationary for half an hour.

Macks pushed the lap-frame door open with the snout of her riot-gun. They slid inside. The interior space was a dingy cone of timber and beamed floors. The mill-gear ran down through the tower's spine like the gears of a gigantic clock.

It smelled of mildew and rotting flour-dust. Drusher took out the pistol. He pointed upwards. Lussin, riot-gun gripped tightly, edged up the open-framed steps to the second level.

Drusher heard something. A slither. A scurry.

He hung back against the wall. There was something up with the auspex. An interference pattern that was making the screen jump. As if an outside signal was chopping the scanner's returns.

Macks circled wide, gun raised to aim at the roof. Lussin reached the head of the stairs and switched around, sweeping with his gun. Drusher tried to get the auspex to clear.

Lussin screamed, and his gun went off. There was a heavy, splintering sound as he fell backwards down the steps, his weapon discharging a second time.

He was dead. The front of his skull was peeled off and blood squirted into the air.

Macks howled, and fired her riot gun into the ceiling, pumping the grip and blasting the rotten floorboards in a blizzard of wood splinters with each successive shot. Every muzzle-flash lit the mill room for a millisecond

Exploding wood away before it, the Beast smashed through the deck and came down at them.

It was a blur. Just a blur, moving faster than anything had a right to. Macks's riot gun boomed again. The creature moved like smoke in a draft. Drusher had a fleeting glimpse of deep purple body plates, a snapping tail of gristly bone, forearm claws like harvest scythes. Macks screamed.

Drusher dropped the auspex and fired his pistol.

The recoil almost broke his wrist. He yelled in pain and frustration, stung hard by the kick. Use both hands, she'd told him.

It turned from Macks, chittering, and bounded across the floor right at him.

It was beautiful. Perfect. An organic engine designed for one sole task: murder. The muscular power of the body, the counter-weight tail; the scythe limbs, like a pair of swords. The inhuman hate.

It had no eyes, at least none that he could see.

Hold the gun with both hands and aim low. That's what she'd said. Because of the kick.

Drusher fired. The recoil slammed up his arms. If he'd hit anything, it wasn't obvious. He fired again.

The Beast opened its mouth. Fifty three centimetres of bite radius, teeth like thorns. The blade-limbs jerking back to kill him.

He fired again. And again. He saw at least one round flick away, deflected by the Beasts' bio-armour.

It was right on him.

And then it was thrown sideways against the wall.

It dropped, writhed, and rose again.

Drusher shot it in the head.

It lunged at him. A riot gun roared and blew it back. Bleeding from the forehead, Macks stepped up and fired blast after blast. She fired until the gun was empty, then took the pistol out of Drusher's hands and emptied that into it too.

Ichor covered the walls. Frothy goo dribbled out of the Beast's fractured bone armour.

'What is it?' Macks asked.

'I believe,' Drusher replied 'it's called an hormagaunt.'

But Macks had passed out.



**I**T TOOK THE better part of an hour for the relief team of arbites to reach them from Udar Town. Drusher had made Macks comfortable by them, and dressed her wounds.

Pistol in hand, he'd carefully examined the beast. The goad-control was easy to find, implanted into the back of the eyeless head.

When Macks came round again, he showed her.

'You need to deal with this.'

'What does it mean?'

'It means this abomination was brought here deliberately. It means that someone was controlling it, directing it in a rudimentary fashion.'

'Really? Like who?'

'I'd start by asking the bishop some questions, and his pet heavy, Gundax. I could be wrong, of course, because it's not my field, but I think the bishop has a lot to gain from something that puts the fear of the God-Emperor into his flock. It steels the faith of a congregation to have something real to rally against.'

'He did this on purpose?'

'It's just a theory. Someone did.'

Macks was quiet for a while. He could guess what she was thinking. There would be an investigation and an inquest. The Inquisition may have to be involved. Every aspect of life in the province would be scrutinised and pulled apart. It could take months. Drusher knew it meant he wouldn't be leaving Outer Udar any time soon. As a chief witness, he'd be required to stay.

Outside, it had begun to sleet again.

'You must be happy at least,' murmured Macks. 'That work of yours, your great taxonomy. It's all done. You've finished.'

'It was done before I even got here,' said Drusher dryly. He nodded at the body of the beast. He'd covered it with a piece of sacking so he didn't have to look at it any more. 'That wasn't part of my job. Just a curiosity.'

'Oh well,' she replied with a sigh.

He went to the mill door, and gazed out into the sleetting wilds. Ice pricked at his face. Gershom would be keeping him in its chilly grip a while longer yet.

'Could I keep this jacket a little longer?' he asked Macks, indicating the fur coat she'd lent him. 'It's going to be a cold winter.'

TALABEIM  
THE TEN-TAILED CAT IN TALABEIM,  
KNOWN THROUGHTOUT THE CITY AS A  
GATHERING PLACE FOR RACONTEURS  
AND THE TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED CAT FOR MANY  
REASONS. SOME TO *BOAST* OF THEIR EXPLOITS,  
SOME TO *AMUSE* AND *ENTERTAIN*, OTHERS TO  
*UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS* OR PASS ON *DIRE*  
*WARNING*S.

AND SOME COME  
LOOKING FOR THE  
FUNDS FOR THEIR  
NEXT MEAL.

I BELIEVE  
THAT PURSE  
IS MINE,  
BOY!

I'M NOT A BOY,  
GOBLIN BREATH! I'M A GIRL,  
AND IT'S YOUR OWN FAULT FOR  
WANDERING ROUND ALL HIGH-AND-  
MIGHTY, WITH YOUR PURSE  
HANGING OUT  
LIKE THAT.

HA!  
YOU'RE QUITE  
RIGHT, MILADY. MY NAME  
IS VIKTOR STEINHOFF, AND  
PERHAPS YOU WOULD GRANT  
ME THE HONOUR OF  
BUYING YOU  
A MEAL

AS IT  
LOOKS LIKE YOU  
HAVEN'T EATEN ANYTHING  
OTHER THAN *VERMIN*  
FOR A LONG  
WHILE.

## TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT

The Mercenary's  
Cafe

SCRIPT: STU TAYLOR  
ART & LETTERS: NIGEL DOBBYN

"NOT THAT I'M UNGRATEFUL BUT WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?"

"PERHAPS YOU CAUGHT ME IN A GOOD MOOD? MAYBE I SEE IN YOU WHAT I ONCE WAS? OR PERHAPS YOU LOOK IN NEED OF A CAUTIONARY TALE OF WHY YOU SHOULD KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF OTHERS' PROPERTY?"

"IN THE HOT AND ARID LAND OF ESTALIA, THERE ONCE LIVED A WEALTHY COUNT CALLED ULI MURNAU."

"HE AMASSED HIS FORTUNE BY LEGITIMATE BUSINESS DEALINGS AS WELL AS THROUGH OTHER, MORE UNSCRUPULOUS MEANS."

"ALTHOUGH HE WAS A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH, MURNAU HAD ONE FUNDAMENTAL WEAKNESS - WOMEN!"

"MURNAU'S FALL FROM GRACE BEGAN WHEN HE WAS CAUGHT 'ENTERTAINING' THE WIFE OF HIS BUSINESS RIVAL, BARON VERLAINE. NEEDLESS TO SAY, THE BARON WAS NOT IMPRESSED."

"ANGERED AND VENGEFUL, VERLAINE USED HIS CONSIDERABLE INFLUENCE TO STRIKE MURNAU WHERE IT WOULD HURT HIM THE MOST IN HIS PURSE!"

"WITHIN A MATTER OF MONTHS, VERLAINE HAD EFFECTIVELY BANKRUPTED MURNAU, LEAVING HIM DESTITUTE AND ON THE STREETS."

"IN A FIT OF DESPERATION, MURNAU ROBBED THE BARON, MAKING OFF WITH A CASKET-LOAD OF VERLAINE'S MOST PRECIOUS GOLD AND JEWELS."

"VERLAINE WOULD NOT LET THIS AFFRONT GO UNPUNISHED. HE HIRED A MERCENARY - ONE WHO HAD CARVED A BLOODY REPUTATION IN THE PERILOUS REGION FAR SOUTH OF HERE, KNOWN AS THE VAULTS."

"THIS MERCENARY WAS SAID TO BE COLD-HEARTED AND RUTHLESS. ONCE HIRED TO DO A TASK, HE WOULD NOT REST UNTIL IT WAS COMPLETE."

"SO VERLAINE KNEW THAT IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE HIS PROPERTY WAS RETURNED TO HIM ALONG WITH COUNT MURNAU'S HEAD!"

MERCENARY TRACKED  
MURNALI CROSS COUNTRY,  
STARTING WITH MURNALI'S LAST  
SIGHTING HERE IN TALABHEIM,  
BEFORE HE HEADED SOUTH TO  
NULV.

"MURNALI FLED WEST OVER THE GREY  
MOUNTAINS - THE MERCENARY STILL  
DOGGIN HIS HEELS - UNTIL HE REACHED  
BRIONNE AND TOOK REFUGE ON A  
PASSENGER BOAT.

THE DEADLY PURSUIT  
CONTINUED ONTO THE GREAT  
OCEAN, WITH THE MERCENARY  
NARROWLY AVOIDING A  
BRUTAL DEATH AT THE HANDS  
OF A SARTOSAN PIRATE  
CAPTAIN.

"AND THEN, MANY LONG MONTHS AFTER HE HAD SET OUT, THE  
MERCENARY FINALLY CAUGHT UP WITH MURNALI IN THE  
TREACHEROUS JUNGLES OF LUSTRIA.

GAK!

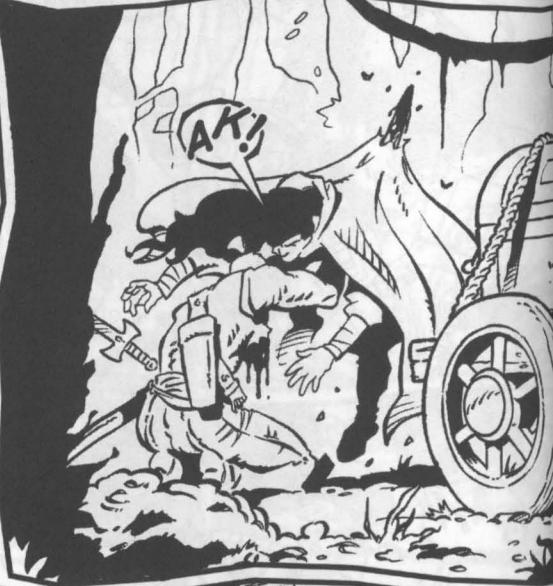
WTF!



YOU'RE A LONG WAY FROM HOME, MURNAU. WHAT SAY WE FINISH THIS LIKE GENTLEMEN BEFORE THE SAURUS REALISE THEY HAVE UNINVITED GUESTS IN THEIR KINGDOM?

I'LL NOT BE INCARCERATED LIKE SOME COMMON CRIMINAL!

IT'S TOO LATE FOR DIPLOMACY NOW, MERCENARY!



"WITH HIS FINAL BREATH, AND HEARING THE SOUNDS OF THE APPROACHING LIZARDMEN, MURNAU EXACTED A FINAL REVENGE"

ALTHOUGH I DIE HERE, THE BARON WILL NEVER SEE HIS HORDE AGAIN









# Murk of the Beast

BY JONATHAN GREEN



TORBEN BADENOV scoured the smouldering remains of the peasant village for signs of life, but saw none. The settlement had been razed to the ground. The acrid odour of burning in the air almost masked another, more sinister reek; Torben knew instinctively what it was. His horse whinnied and snorted; she could smell it too, and it made even this hardy, steppe-bred warhorse uneasy. The musky odour was of something both animal and man, less than either but at the same time greater: the stink of the beastman.

For ten days the border patrol commanded by the highborn Captain Yasharov, had been hunting the beastman warband through the snow and ice of the coniferous forests, where the lands of the Taiga met the foothills of the Worlds Edge Mountains.

Torben ran fingers through his tangle of raven coloured hair and looked to where his men waited, as Captain Yasharov and his entourage rode up the wind-scoured slope in front of the broken posts of the settlement stockade.

Torben had been in the army of the Tzar for five years, first as a foot soldier and now as a cavalryman commanding fifteen men. He looked to each of them in turn. There was Oran Scarfen, a rat-faced, whiskered rogue from Talabheim; there was Vladimir Grozny, a huge, heavy-set bald-headed Dolgan. Adjusting the padded jerkin of his leather armour was Alexi of Nuln, one of the Emperor's men. Alexi was the oldest in the band. Next came the two Tolyev brothers, Arkady and Andrei. Absent-mindedly cleaning the blade of an ebony-handled knife was Manfred of Stirland.

Oleg Chenkoff, named the 'Preacher' by the men, sat in an attitude of prayer. Under his chainmail shirt he wore a sackcloth habit. Like so many others, his family had

been murdered by the predations of a marauding northmen tribe. The experience had unhinged his mind, driving him into a sanctuary of religious fanaticism, and compelling him to find service in Tzar Bokha's army that he might smite the enemies of mankind with righteous vengeance. His constant muttering of holy scripture unnerved some of the other men. He was mumbling now.

'Be quiet, Preacher,' said a blond-haired giant, seated high in the saddle of the roan next to Oleg. Arnwolf's huge physique denoted his Norse ancestry. Beside the huge barbarian was Zabrov, a sallow-skinned steppes warrior. He rode saddleless and without reins, as if he had been born on a horse.

Mikhail Polenko was a member of an offshoot branch of the noble household of Praag and was quick to remind people of his proud and ancient lineage.

Then there was Yuri Gorski who was practically a boy compared to the rest of them. The remaining four had been transferred from the remnants of a unit that suffered heavy casualties in an earlier skirmish. Kiryl, Evgenii, Cheslav and Stefan were their names.

The whole unit was uneasy. It had been only two days since they had last seen evidence of the beast horde's rampage. Their quarry must be almost within reach: Torben could feel it.

The young cavalryman commander looked at his captain and Arman Yasharov returned the stare with fixed cold eyes. His flat nose and chiselled features spoke of his noble heritage, as did the swathing ermine-lined cloak and fine leather boots he wore.

Torben despised Captain Yasharov, and he was not alone. He was arrogant, ill mannered, short-tempered and lacked any

real battle experience. Even in a country with a reputation for raising mighty warriors, there were still those who attained high position by familial influence, money or favouritism.

The unit commanders held the captain in low regard, but none would dare disobey his orders. The only ones who didn't seem to share the general consensus were the captain's personal bodyguard, and Torben knew that their loyalty did not come cheaply. So it was that Captain Yasharov was secure in his position as general of one of the Tzar's armies.

However, Torben could well imagine that Yasharov had been given this border patrol to lead thanks to the machinations of a political rival of his father's. Somebody, it seemed, with influence even greater than Ramov Yasharov liked him about as much as his own troops did.

'It's definitely them,' Torben told the captain.

'We cannot be certain that this was the work of the horde we are hunting, commander. There are many such warbands infesting these forests.'

'I'm sorry, sir, but we can be sure,' Torben said, barely suppressing his frustration at his commanding officer's irritating incompetence, and pointed over the ridge behind him.

A gust of wind brought the slurry stink of the dung to the captain's nostrils before his eyes took in the scene. Excrement had been crudely arranged in moist piles to form a particular shape, one that they all now recognised. They had seen it many times since they had begun tracking the beastmen: torn into the bark of trees; daubed in blood on the rent awning of a pillaged wagon or made from the carefully-arranged bones of the warband's victims. The 'Mark of the Beast', some of the men had called it. It was a crude, almost runic, representation of a skull: two long, curved horns in the ascendant, two shorter horns framing the oval outline of a long-muzzled head. But they had never seen it on such a scale before. Here, the combined manure of the whole warband had been gathered together and moulded into a symbol that covered an area the size of a field.

The first signs they had come across of the warband had suggested a pack numbering somewhere in the region of twenty creatures. But it had taken more than twenty ruminating digestive tracts to produce this amount of excrement. Either the pack was growing in size or the first group they had encountered was only a splinter force of a much larger tribe, and one into whose territory Yasharov's army had now strayed.

Torben had heard a rumour that there were more beastmen in the world than men. It was a nightmarish thought and Torben put it down to being just that – an exaggeration. Now he wasn't so sure.

But something else troubled him. The corpses of several of the razed settlement's defenders lay amidst the ruins. But they had found no other bodies among the burnt out buildings. Where were the rest of the villagers?



**G**ASHRAKK Blackhoof, beastman champion, Chosen of the Great Beast and leader of the Dark Horn tribe, fixed Cathbad with a piercing black stare that bore into the shaman's own blinking caprine eyes like a bone-tipped spear. Gashrakk was bigger and bulkier than the most formidable of his bestigors warriors. His whole body was corded with muscle and covered with a tough dark hide. Ridged horns rose proudly from his monstrous goat head. His flesh was pierced with symbols of his dark gods and he had a thick iron ring through his nose.

He was no mere blood-lusting beast. Of course, bloodletting and cruel violence had its part to play in sovereignty but Gashrakk was above those other chieftains who thought nothing of strategy and posterity. He has been blessed by the Chaos Gods, granted a malign, human intelligence combined with savage, animal cunning.

Cathbad the shaman wore a hooded robe that covered his body completely. It was decorated with esoteric sigils, painted with a mixture of blood and soot. Two long horns emerged from holes in the hood. The

cloak-robe was tied at the waist with a gut cord and he held a long staff, adorned with animal skulls.

'You summoned me, my Lord Blackhoof,' the Dark Horns' shaman grunted in the guttural words of the beastmen's ugly tongue.

Gashrakk snorted gruffly, a gust of animal-breath turning the rancid air around him even ranker. 'I did. I want you to read the auguries for the sacrifice. I need to know if today is the propitious time.'

'I come prepared.' The shaman ushered two gor beastmen into the chieftain's hut. Slumped between them was a human prisoner, gagged and bound. Cathbad pulled a large saw-edge gutting knife from inside his robes, the prisoner's eyes widened in terror. The gor guards tightened their grip on the panicking man's arms and his desperate wailing penetrated the gag that stopped his mouth.

Cathbad thrust the serrated knife into the man's midriff. With a sharp tug the shaman opened him up from stomach to sternum. Eyes screaming, the man watched as the rent in his abdomen bulged and ejected his intestines, the viscera flopping wetly and splashed onto the packed earth floor. The light in his eyes faded but the agonised grimace remained. The beastmen released their hold on the prisoner and the body crumpled to the ground.

The soothsayer stared at the pattern formed by the entrails and the pooling fluids.

'The omens, are they good?' prompted the beastlord.

'The gods smile on this day,' Cathbad said. 'The signs are auspicious for the sacrifice. Slaughter the prisoners this night and the Lord of Misrule, the Lord of Beasts, will be freed of his prison, to fulfil the ancient prophecy.'

At the shaman's words, Gashrakk considered the tribal herdstone, which stood on the highest ground within the camp, like some malevolent grey-black sentinel. The monolith was huge: three gors high, weighing as much as the whole herd. It was adorned with lengths of rusted chain from which dangled the tribe's trophies and remnants of offerings made to

their bloodthirsty gods.

But what made the Dark Horns' herdstone unusual was the ancient prophecy that wound over the fractured faces of the rock. Carved countless seasons past in still-potent runes, it told of the Lord of Misrule, who had once held great swathes of land in the grip of his anarchic rule; a kingdom of confusion. It told how he had been conquered; how he now slept within a prison of stone, the Cave of Beasts; how he would one day be freed by a champion of the descendants of his tribe, to return order and civilisation to the natural bestial state of chaos and wanton destruction, red in tooth and claw, where beast preyed upon beast.

Gashrakk's lips formed something approximating a smile. Then tonight it would be. It was Gashrakk's belief that if he sacrificed enough souls to the daemon-beastlord he would rightly be made the greatest of those champions, and thus rewarded. The Lord of Misrule's return would throw the lands of men into anarchy and the Dark Horns would rampage across the realms of Kislev and the Empire in a bloodthirsty orgy of killing.

'Beware!' Cathbad suddenly declared. 'I see an army marching on our camp, an army of the hu-men.'

'Hu-men,' Gashrakk growled. 'But the omens are good for the ritual to take place?'

'Of course, my lord.'

'Then nothing must be allowed to prevent its happening.' He turned to one of his guards. 'You! Take word to Slangar and Barruk! Tell them to marshal their warriors. Nothing must disrupt the sacrifice. We will deal with these hu-men like the litter of runts they are, and paint our fur with their blood!'



IT HAD BEEN easy for Torben Badenov's scouts to follow the tracks left by the beastman horde. There had been nothing more the Kislevite soldiers could do for the nameless settlement and its lost populace, other than to avenge its memory and not rest until their chieftain's

head adorned a stake outside the army's camp.

Torben spurred his steed forward, coming level with the sharp-eyed Yuri Gorski and Mikhail Polenko. The other thirteen mounted men were spread out across the valley behind them. As Torben's unit scouted ahead through the wild, untamed hills, the bulk of Captain Yasharov's army trudged through the wilderness, several miles behind them.

Torben felt uneasy. He felt – knew – that something was waiting for them out here in the wilderness of the barren uplands. It was perfect ambush territory. He had not wanted to take this route and had suggested circling around the valley to come upon the beastmen from upwind to ensure a surprise attack. He suspected that the creatures already had the scent of the approaching army. Yasharov had rubbed the idea immediately, laughing at Torben's, 'inane understanding of strategy.'

'That could take days!' he had scoffed. 'The way to win this is to charge at the heart of the foe as quickly as possible, and rip it out!'

Torben guessed their captain was eager to return to hearth and home, at any cost. Torben scanned the rim of the valley. Its crest appeared almost black against the clouded grey-white of the winter sky. They would have to make the best of the situation. They could not return to Yasharov until they had at least sighted the beastmen.

And then Torben saw them.

At first they were no more than black silhouettes against the stark horizon, lank manes blowing in the wind, flint-headed spears in hand, taking their place in line around the valley sides. Then they were a pelting mass of leaping, bounding bodies. Torben's men cried out to each other, drawing their weapons as the beastmen set about them.

It was immediately apparent as the pack converged that Torben's scouts were greatly outnumbered. The horses whinnied and shied but the soldiers did their best to bring them back under control.

Darting glances from side to side, Torben saw four of the filthy, dark-skinned beastmen moving towards him. These were of the breed that some scholars and soldiers referred to as ungors, or un-men. Their bodies were thickly haired with contrasting-coloured fur covering their shoulders and descending the length of their spines to the scraggy tuft of a vestigial tail. Horns protruded from their foreheads, some no more than nubs of bone, others sporting crowns of several darkly ridged projections. All of them carried crude hide-stretched, wooden shields and deadly gutting-spears.

As the first ungor thrust at the mounted Torben, he was ready with a powerful down swing that batted the shaft of the spear away. The beastman stumbled forward on cloven feet, carried towards the mounted soldier by the momentum of its lunge. As a result, Torben's returning upswing caught the creature under the jaw. Half its face disappeared as the malformed mandible was torn free. The ungor fled, screaming through the ragged, gaping wound.

Torben turned his steed towards his other attackers, as all around him his men engaged with the hollering beast warriors. The reins clenched firmly in his left hand, Torben swept his sword at the stooped figure to his right. He caught the beastman across its shoulders, opening a bright crimson wound in the matted fur.

Another beastman jabbed at Torben's steed with its spear. The horse reared, whinnying, and Torben's second stroke missed. But the horse's hooves came crashing down on the injured ungor's head, hurling it onto the iron-hard, frozen ground and cracking its skull open.

As Torben despatched those others who had foolishly taken him on, he already knew his men were in trouble, despite the fact that many were holding their own against the ungor pack. Vladimir Grozny, unhorsed, his steed gone, stood drenched in the blood of the foe, with a mound of beastman heads and corpses at his feet.

Arnwolf was in single combat with a beastman that was taller and more heavily muscled than the human-sized ungors. This must be the pack leader, Torben

thought. Beastman polearm clanged against Norse axe-steel as Arnwolf deftly parried a two-handed downward strike and then backhanded his opponent across the snout.

The Preacher was delivering divine retribution against the savages with a gore-splattered hammer gripped tightly in his white-knuckled fists. 'Begone, foul spawn of Chaos!' Oleg yelled as he shattered the spine of another beastman with his holy weapon.

The skirmish had split into two halves. Torben, Arnwolf, Oleg and half a dozen other soldiers had quickly broken the beastman charge on their side, although the dull-witted beasts had spread their warriors unevenly so Torben's half had met with the weaker assault.

The rest of his cavalrymen, caught unawares by the sudden ambush, had not fared so well. As Torben galloped to their aid he realised that the bodies of several men and horses lay twitching or motionless on the valley floor amidst the snow and scree. Zabrov lay curled around an ungor spear, which thrust vertically into the air from where it was sunk into his dead body. Mikhail Polenko lay half-crushed beneath the carcass of his own thoroughbred steed, desperately fending off three slavering brown-furred beasts.

At the same time, a number of the ungors, who had at first fled when their ambush had not immediately brought down Torben's cavalrymen, were regrouping at the other end of the valley, under a filth-encrusted banner that looked like stretched human skin, which bore the Mark of the Beast.

Oran Scarfen, however, was surrounded by more than half a dozen beastmen, and he wasn't dead yet. As Torben closed the distance between them he saw Oran's horse dragged down by the beastmen and his friend disappeared from view amidst the excitedly braying ungors.

With a shouted 'Yaaah!' Torben urged his panting mount on even harder.

He felt the rumbling through the vibrations of the rock-hard ground before he heard it, drumming like the cartwheels of a loaded wagon. Looking towards the head of the valley he saw the two chariots

thundering towards them, bristling with spikes and slicing blades, iron-shod wheels gouging great ruts in the frost-hardened turf, and pulled by monstrous horned and tusked creatures that combined the very worst and most savage attributes of great boars and brutish rams.

The arrival of the chariots alone could assure the beastmen their victory. Turning his whinnying steed to face the rumbling chariots, Torben prepared to break their charge.



**D**ND YOU'RE the only ones who remain?' Captain Yasharov asked as he surveyed the survivors of Torben's unit. 'Half of you?'

'That's correct, sir,' Torben said. Only eight of them had rejoined the rest of the border patrol. Following the appearance of the chariots, despite Torben's men managing to wreck one of them, five of his fellows had been seized and carried off by the second tuskgor-drawn contraption – Oran, Manfred, Andrei, Evgenii and Mikhail. Three had died: the steppes warrior Zabrov, the untried Cheslav and Kiryl. 'We were ambushed.'

'And you failed to locate the horde's encampment,' Yasharov said pointedly.

'Yes, sir. We were down to half strength and needed to regroup to effect a rescue.'

'Your orders were to locate the enemy camp. That is what scouts are for, is it not?'

'If we had continued it is doubtful there would have been any of us left alive to return and tell you the location of the camp.'

'Well, no matter,' Yasharov said, smiling coldly, disdain visible in his eyes. 'Boris Bogdashka's infantry found it for you. And their scouting mission met with no such misfortune.'

Torben was fuming inside but he said nothing. His survivors had made their way back to the main force to find that the army had made camp, following news of the discovery of the enemy's stockade, to prepare for the final decisive push. That

night the Kislevites would lay siege to the beastmen's stronghold.

'The beastman camp is within a stockade atop what remains of an ancient earthwork. It is not far from here, beyond a spur of the pine forest. Order your unit to ready themselves. We attack at dusk. Dismissed.'

Torben remained exactly where he was.

'I said, you are dismissed,' Yasharov repeated, fire creeping into his voice.

'Sir, we should mount a rescue to free my men. I also believe that the beastmen have other prisoners, taken from the villages they've raided. Why, I do not know, but I do know it is not the normal behaviour of the warped ones.'

'Why would you want to rescue them?' Yasharov asked, an incredulous look on his blunt features.

Torben's loathing for his commander was increasing by the minute.

'Other than to save my men from a horrible death, you mean? Men I value and respect, some of whom I consider my friends?' Torben retorted. 'Other than that, the beasts must be planning something, I'm sure of it, possibly some dark ritual. It could be dangerous negligence to let such a ritual take place. Who knows what the consequences might be?'

'We are fighting a war against these mutants and in war there are bound to be casualties. Your men, and any other prisoners the beastmen may have taken, are expendable.'

Torben's blood was boiling. 'Good soldiers are a commodity you should do your best to protect,' he rejoined.

'I have suffered enough of your insolence! It is time you learnt your place!'

'I am sorry, my lord,' Torben lied, 'but if you would only give me a few hours we could at least try to infiltrate the camp and free the prisoners before the main attack.'

'In a matter of hours we will be ready to attack the stockade and cull this tribe, dealing with them once and for all.'

'But by then it may be too late. They know we are coming. The prisoners could have been sacrificed before we can rescue them and who knows what dark blessings such a sacrifice might bestow upon the

horde? It could be the difference between victory and defeat.'

'You cannot even be sure that the prisoners are still alive, if indeed there are any!'

Yasharov was silent for several long, agonisingly drawn out seconds.

'Very well,' the captain said at last. 'You have until nightfall. Then the rest of us go in.'



**L**OOK,' SAID Alexi, pointing excitedly at the hilltop from the party's seclusion within the pines. 'You can see quite clearly how the stockade has been planted around the top of the earthwork. Those contours aren't natural. Some long-dead tribe built up the hill and turned it into a fortification.'

Stripped tree trunks had been rammed into the hillside and the palisade strengthened at irregular intervals by massive granite monoliths. Rising above the sharpened points of the great sunken logs they could all see a huge wicker effigy that had been erected inside the camp. It reminded Torben in part of the figures woven from corn stalks at harvest time, only it was constructed from numerous wicker cages lashed together in the form of a colossal beastman. Even from this distance, Torben could clearly see the antlered skull of some Chaos beast mounted on the 'head'. From between the spars of the wooden cages hands and arms waved in pathetic supplication. Torben's suspicions had been correct.

'I see what you mean,' Torben nodded.

'And that could also provide us with a way in,' Alexi said, a wry smile forming on his lips.

'How?' asked Vladimir.

'The ancestors of your people often dug secret escape routes through the earth beneath their hill-forts as a way out in dire emergencies. Sometimes they emerge up to half a mile away from the earthwork.'

'What are you trying to say?' Stefan muttered.

'Isn't it obvious?' Yuri said, fixing their newest recruit with a harsh glare.

'A way out can also be a way in,' Torben explained.

On foot, avoiding the attentions of the beastmen above, it was not a difficult matter for them to get closer to the hill-crowning edifice and begin their search for a secret way into the camp.



**I**!! SCARFEN!' a voice hissed. 'Are you awake?' Oran opened his eyes.

'Manfred?' Oran replied, trying to look round.

'Up here.'

'What's going on? Where are we?' Oran's wrists and ankles had been roughly bound and where the rope rubbed his skin was sore with red welts circling his wrists.

'Have a look for yourself,' came Manfred's disgruntled reply.

Turning his head, Oran saw that he had been squashed inside a wicker cage with several other people, all packed on top of one another. He was pressed against the crossed spars of one side of their prison. Squeezing around within the cramped cage, Oran tried to assess precisely where they were.

The cage was just one of many that had been fastened together to form a much larger structure. He found himself looking out across the entirety of what he realised must be the beast horde's camp. It was a stockaded hilltop. Beyond it the sun was setting behind the pine-forested horizon, painting the sky and distant snow-capped peaks orange and mauve.

The spaces between the bars of the cage were wide enough for Oran to push his face through. He looked down and immediately regretted the action. His head began to spin; he was over fifteen feet above the ground. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard, fighting against the rising vertiginous nausea.

He opened his eyes but this time looked straight ahead. As he took in more of the cages lashed together around him he began to see a definite shape to the structure. It was that of a giant figure and his cage was part of its trunk. The colossus stood on two pillared legs while other cages, hanging from broad-beamed shoulders, formed its arms. Stacked high around the structure's legs were faggots of wood. There was no doubt as to the intended fate of the captives.

In front of the bonfire stood the granite monolith of the tribe's herdstone. The menhir was festooned with human remains hung on rusted chains – some no more than skeletons, others still red-raw and glistening. His vision blurred and he felt his stomach turn over as cold sweat beaded on his skin. He had looked down again.

Twisting his neck, Oran was just able to look upwards. The monstrous wicker edifice was surmounted by an equally monstrous skull. He wondered what sort of warped beast had ever existed for there to be such a relic. Every part of the pyre was packed tight with human prisoners. Now he knew what had happened to the inhabitants of the villages. Some of those who were still able moaned and wailed their plight to the heavens, while others huddled together within the cage whimpering or remaining eerily silent.

'Are there any of the others in here?' Oran asked of his companion.

'I can see Polenko through the bars of the cage above me, but I'm not sure if he's even alive. I know that one of the Tolyevs was brought here with us – Andrei, I think – but other than that, I don't know.'

Despite his hands being bound Oran was still able to reach inside his jerkin and, with relief, found his dagger still secreted there. By manipulating the sharp blade with his fingers alone he was able to cut through the hemp with ease. However, he didn't fancy his chances with the blade against the wicker staves of the cage.

'Can you see any way out of here?' Oran asked.

'Yes,' Manfred's replied. 'There's a door. It wouldn't be hard to force it open, but we're not going anywhere trussed up like a couple of game birds.'

'Don't worry about that,' Oran replied, 'Just worry about forcing that door.'



**D**S THE LAST light of day leeched away, Cathbad the shaman began the ritual to reawaken the Lord of Misrule.

A hush fell over the assembled herd. Beastman rituals were usually raucous, unruly affairs, but this night the assembled tribe understood that what was occurring was more momentous than anything they had ever witnessed before. They were summoning their god.

Gashrakk gripped the burning brand tightly in a great hairy paw, fingers as thick as a man's wrist curled around the wood ready to ignite the pyre and make the sacrifice. The flickering flames cast rippling orange shadows over the contours of his slab-muscled torso as Cathbad's guttural chanting intoned the incantation.

Gashrakk could feel the quickening power of Chaos coursing through his body. He snorted in excited anticipation. In moments the sacrifice would be made, the prophecy would be fulfilled and he would face his destiny, revelling in an orgy of unrestrained bloodlust against the forces of order. All would be returned to its primal, uncivilised state where the only law was to kill or be killed and the beast ruled supreme.

And unseen by Gashrakk, Cathbad or the tribe, high up on the structure of the wicker beastman, two figures emerged from the splintered door of one of the cages and began to scale the monstrous effigy.



**T**HE NAUSEOUS reek of the dung heap swept over Torben as he emerged from the tunnel. Thanks to Arnwolf's tracking skills and Yuri's sharp eyes, it had not taken the rescue party long to locate a half-collapsed opening

overgrown by the straggling tangle of a bush, itself half-buried under a drift of snow. Twenty feet into the tunnel, they had discovered that it rose to the height of a man, the tunnel wall reinforced with slabs of rock.

Torben had led the way, a half-shuttered lantern guiding them through the dank darkness. More slabs of stone gave the shaft its form and also provided irregularly distanced steps, creating a rock ladder that led up to the earthwork above.

It had taken them longer than they had hoped to infiltrate the camp. A large, flat stone covered the earthwork end of the escape tunnel, which had itself become covered by the general detritus of the camp. They had smelt the mound of excrement that seemed to be the beastmen's privy, several feet from the top of the chimney. They now crouched behind it as they took in their surroundings.

'There's no fear of them smelling us coming,' Vladimir grunted disconsolately.

'Listen!' Yuri hissed.

Torben did so and realised how quiet it was. A lone braying voice came to them from the southern end of the camp, along with pitiful moans.

'We'll be outnumbered Sigmund knows how many-to-one but any time now the rest of the army are going to attack, providing us with just the distraction we need to free the prisoners,' Torben explained. 'When we see their torches we need to be in position.'

'It sounds like the beasts are too preoccupied and dull-witted to be on guard against an attack from right inside their own stockade,' Arkady suggested.

'Just the same, watch your backs. We don't know what sort of creatures they might have keeping guard for them.'

Cautiously, the party began to creep through the abandoned huts of the encampment. There was no need for the lantern now, the night was clear. The flicker of torches could also be seen beyond the solid black shape that towered over the camp.

How long did they have, Torben wondered, before the Kislevite attack came? They had best move quickly, if they

were to have any chance of saving their companions. Then, as the party rounded the side of the largest hut, Yuri stopped them again.

'I hear something,' he said.

Torben scrambled up onto the crudely thatched roof of the hut. From his vantage point he could see the beastman herd thronged before the towering effigy. And then he saw them; dancing specks of yellow-orange light bobbing towards the hill-camp from the jagged, black silhouette of the pine forest in a snaking line.

Torben cursed. 'They're coming!'

'Let's pray that we're not too late to rescue anyone at all,' Oleg muttered.

claim them or whether they would fall to their deaths first, as vertigo threatened to overwhelm him.

Shrill cries cut through the night air, audible over the excited braying of the beastmen. The two soldiers had shown others a way out of their predicament and some of those who had shared their cage had begun to follow them. However, the prisoners were struggling to climb the wicker structure with wrists and ankles still tied. Some lost their grip, falling into the hungry flames below. Others were being picked off by spears hurled by the beastmen, as the tribe became aware of the prisoners' escape attempt.

'Scarfen, move it!' Manfred roared in desperation.

His whole body shaking, Oran continued his laborious ascent.



**L**ASHRAKK Blackhoof saw the lights too and realised what must have happened. The ambush had failed. It could only have been a skirmish force that Slangar and Barruk's ungors had fought, not the whole hu-man army. But he wasn't going to let his plan fail now.

Snarling in rage and before Cathbad could finish the ritual, Gashrakk plunged the brand into the bonfire at the feet of the wicker colossus. Doused with tar, the faggots ignited with an incendiary roar. The shaman looked on in horror, the sacred rite climaxing too quickly, as the caged prisoners' screams drowned out the beastlord's triumphant bellow.



**L**RAN CLUNG TO the bars of the giant beastman feeling like he was going to vomit.

'Move it, Scarfen!' Manfred encouraged, only a few feet beneath him.

'I-I'm trying!'

It had been the only thing to do, Oran told himself, but now, as they climbed higher to escape the rising flames, they only seemed to be delaying the inevitable. It was hard to say whether the fire would

**F**OR KISLEV and the Tzar! Torben yelled and flung himself, sabre drawn, at the monstrous beastman standing before the blazing bonfire. Before the creature knew what was happening, Torben had sunk his blade into the thick, corded muscle of its flank.

The monster roared, a sound born of pain and red rage. Torben tugged his weapon free, as the monstrous beastman span round to face him. It was half as tall again as Torben, its long horns curving upwards from its ugly, distended goat-head, adding to his height. His head was slung low, between broad, hunched shoulders and a shaggy mane of hair covered the muscular neck. Two great yellow tusks jutted from its jaw drooled thick saliva.

It wore a hide loincloth, trophies it had taken, as a champion of the beastmen, hanging from its waist, a macabre testament to its savage prowess in battle. Below the knee the creature's legs became backward-jointed animal limbs, ending in cloven hooves. No doubt to honour some primitive deity, the beastman had various parts of its body pierced by thick iron. Most impressive of all, however, was the huge



ring through its snout. Everything about it spoke of ferocious strength: it looked capable of wrestling a bear and winning. The orbs of its caprine eyes burned with the reflected glow of the roaring bonfire.

The champion hefted its oversized, jagged-edged cleaver and, opening wide its mouth, bellowed. Torben didn't need to be able to understand the beastmen's language to know that it was a direct challenge.

The Kislevite needed no second invitation. Yelling his own battle-cry Torben flung himself at the beast.

His opponent was surprisingly fast and agile. Torben parried the beast's first ringing blow but staggered back under its force, his own muscles protesting as he maintained his position. Out of the corner of his eye Torben saw Arnwolf wrestling with the tribe's robed shaman, axe and bone-staff locked. Alexi and Vladimir were leading the others against the closest of the startled herd.

Any moment now, Torben told himself. Any moment now the rest of the border patrol would crash through the gates of the stockade like the Sea of Claws breaking against the cold coast of Kislev. But the attack never came – at least not as Torben imagined it would.

He heard the riders galloping past on the other side of the stockade, their horses' hooves pounding the frozen ground, but it took Torben a few moments to realise what the riders had done. Putting the stockade to the torch, Yasharov's knights had trapped the beastmen inside and Torben's rescue party along with them.

Hatred and fury burning in his heart, Torben realised they had been betrayed. Considered expendable by their captain, Yasharov had simply used them as a distraction, so that he could put an end to the beast horde once and for all, condemning the tribe's prisoners along with their captors.

Sudden, sickening doubt gripped Torben's stomach, as it became abruptly apparent that the outcome of the battle was no longer as assured as he might have at first hoped. Then steely resolve entered his heart. If it was his destiny to die here and now, then at least he would die fighting!

They traded blow for blow, Torben putting every ounce of his strength and every iota of concentration into the battle while the beastman's blood-lusting rage, relentless in its ferocity, drove it on against him. This was no scrawny, half-starved specimen but a true monster among monsters. Torben knew there was no way he could win this fight by brawn alone: the brute's massive body seemed to soak up every wound he managed to inflict against it. He would have to use his brains as well, something that from his experience most beastmen lacked.

The Kislevite and the champion fought on, Torben carefully manoeuvring them away from the heat and smoke of the conflagration towards the trophy-hung menhir. As he jumped backwards, to avoid a swipe of the heavy-headed cleaver, he felt the cold stone at his back and his hand touch the rusted links of a chain. Carried forward by the momentum of his swing, the beastman champion almost lumbered into Torben. This close he could smell its foetid reek, like a cowshed overdue a mucking out.

He thrust his sword forwards at the creature's unprotected midriff, but this was merely a diversionary tactic. The end of the chain in his hand, he swiftly pushed its hooked end through the iron ring in the beastman's nose and rattled it through with a strong tug. Snorting, the beastman lowered his horns, preparing to skewer Torben on their sharpened points.

Turning away from the beastman's goring attack Torben pushed the hook through another link in the chain, which was still securely attached to the herdstone. He backed off hurriedly as the champion swung at him with his brutal weapon again. Missing him, it lunged for Torben.

Torben clearly heard the sickening crunch of cartilage breaking over the roar of the burning wicker beastman, as the chain pulled on the great nose-ring. His opponent bellowed in pain and tried to free itself but the links of the chain remained strong. Torben heard a crash and a screaming roar. Turning to the source of the pain-induced bellow he saw the robed shaman crashing into one blazing leg of the wicker effigy, its body a mess of red

wounds dealt it by Arnwolf's rune-inscribed axe, as it recoiled from another mighty blow from the Norscan. The burning wood of the leg, already weakened by the flames, gave way, the shaman being swallowed by the white-hot conflagration. With one of its supports destroyed, the whole burning structure gave way.

Torben looked up to see the fiery body of cages, packed with roasted peasants, toppling towards him. Despite his wearying battle with the beastman champion, with an almighty leap Torben flung himself out of the way of the collapsing effigy.



**L**ASHRAKK Blackhoof, champion of the Great Beast and chief of the Dark Horns, bellowed his anger to the heavens as the burning effigy of his god crashed down on top of him, a burning spar impaling his instantly combusted body.



**O**RAN AND Manfred clung to the antlered skull-head of the pyre as it came crashing down in a blizzard of sparks and fiery smoke. Oran closed his eyes tight when he saw the sharpened tips of the burning palisade coming up to meet him.

Then he was falling, before scant seconds later he hit slushy snow and started rolling down the steep slope of the man-made hill. The head of the towering effigy had cleared the perimeter fence, throwing him and Manfred clear of the flames altogether.



**T**ORBEN, ALEXI, Yuri and Arnwolf raced through the blazing stockade, the air around them filled with swirling sparks. There was nothing they could do for their fellows who had died valiantly, battling the beastmen. Oleg, Arkady, Stefan and Vladimir had all succumbed to their animal wrath. Now the four of them who remained, could only hope to save themselves and with a pack of fire-maddened beastmen at their heels, there was no only one hope for them.

Yuri was the first into the tunnel, diving into the hole by the dung heap. The others quickly followed, half-scrambling and half-falling down the shaft cut through the earth and rock. The first of the goatmen plunged headfirst in after them, only to become wedged in the narrow tunnel entrance, being so much broader than its quarry.

At the bottom of the hill again, the four survivors gathered reunited. The Kislevite cavalry who had launched the attack on the stockade were now mere flickering specks within the tree line once again.

The fire consuming the beastman camp lit the hills and forest for a quarter of a mile. As the flames rose high into the night sky, for a fleeting moment Torben fancied he saw a roaring antlered head appear briefly amidst the conflagration before vanishing.

Was it something being banished, he wondered, or summoned?



**S**THE STOCKADE continued to burn in the distance, back under the shelter of the trees, the survivors of Torben's unit found the other Kislevite soldiers gone, assured of the success of their captain's brutally effective tactics. As far as Captain Yasharov was concerned, the abducted villagers and even his own men could burn if it meant he achieved his goal, without putting himself at risk.

'I don't know who I loathe more – the beastmen or Yasharov,' Torben seethed.

'It was a massacre,' Manfred stated coldly.

'So what are you suggesting we do?' Alexi asked Torben. 'Desert?'

'Yasharov thinks we're dead already anyway,' Torben replied, the first hint of a grin creasing his face.

Yuri looked at Torben anxiously: 'What would we do then?'

'Do what we've always done. Live by the sword – as mercenaries.'



**T**HE NEXT NIGHT the moon hung full and gibbous in the star-pricked sky over the Kislevite camp. Torben Badenov and his companions had watched and waited as their erstwhile fellow soldiers celebrated defeating the beastmen. But now, with half the night gone, the sounds of carousing had finally ceased as drink and sleep overcame Captain Yasharov's men.

'Are you ready?' Torben whispered to the foully grinning Oran.

'Oh yes,' the weaselly man replied, playing with the blackened dagger in his hands, 'I'm ready'.

'We won't be long,' Torben said, addressing Alexi, Yuri, Manfred and the burly Arnwolf, 'Then we can be on our way.' He lifted a heavy, bulging sack over one shoulder. 'We've got a delivery to make.'

With that, he and Oran slipped between the tents like fleeting shadows.



**T**HE MORNING after the attack was cold and frosty. Lev Kolenski stumbled through the tents, clumsily strapping on his sword belt, to take his turn at gate duty. The chill morning breeze was clearing his muzzy head and he began to gently whistle, his breath pluming into white clouds.

Reaching the entrance to the camp the soldier froze, the tune dying on his lips. His eyes widened in shock and he put a hand

to his mouth to stem the bitter tasting bile that rose up his throat. He staggered backwards, his still unbuckled sword belt slipping onto the frosty ground, then turned tail and scampered back into the camp towards Captain Yasharov's pavilion.



**B**ORIS BAGDASHA stepped quietly into Yasharov's tent after repeatedly failing to wake him from outside. He stopped abruptly, mortified by the sight that greeted him. Yasharov's bedclothes were twisted and rumpled, the pure white fur of the top blanket saturated with glistening red blood. Protruding from underneath the sheets was Yasharov's hand, his fingers bent into claws as if in a paroxysm of agony. His emerald signet ring winked balefully in the morning light. But the thing that lay on the deeply stained pillows made Kolenski double up and vomit violently onto the tents' lush carpeting. Staring back at him from burnt out eye sockets was the remains of a monstrous and unmistakably goat-like head, severed at the neck, with long curving horns protruding from its charred skull and a blackened tongue lolling from the side of its scorched mouth.

Bagdasha stooped out of the tent, nausea and shock making his head spin. He regained some of his senses when Kolenski, babbling incoherently, hared round from behind a tent and almost bowled him over.

Outside the camp, just past the gates, a huge black rook settled gently on the bald, fleshy lump that sat atop a post driven firmly into the ground. It ruffled its oily coloured feathers and cawed, sharp eyes darting over the land. Then, with a powerful thrust of its neck, it buried its hooked beak into the juicy eye socket and tore free a lump of jellied fluid. The bird began to feast busily, as above more carrion birds began to circle.

And on the wind-blasted plains of Kislev, Captain Arman Yasharov's dead eyes wept red tears. \*

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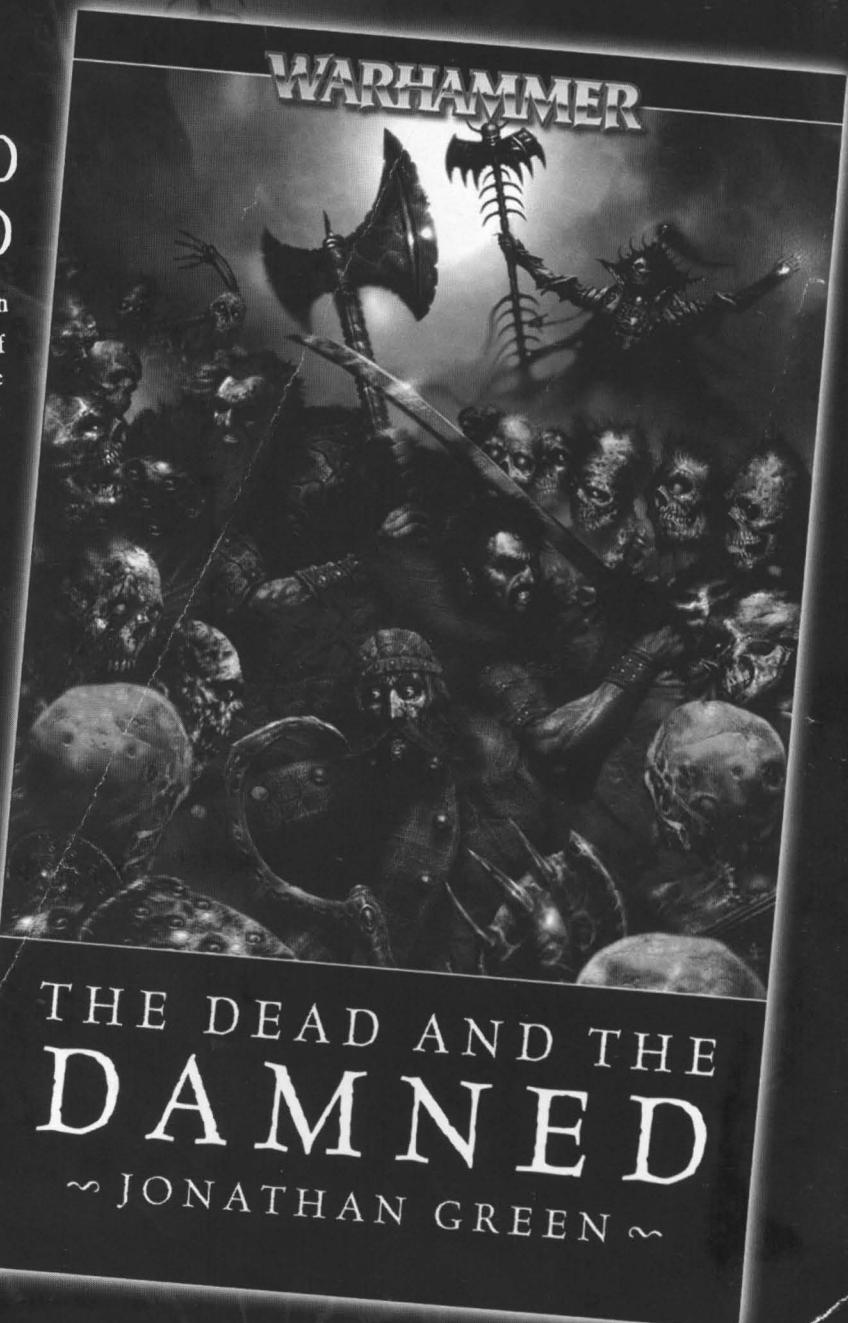
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*Only when the echoes of the pistol-crack had fled from the chamber did time appear to flow freely again. Dry fragments of cloth capered briefly in the air, blown clear of the shambling figure by the force of the impact. The creature itself had folded away neatly: no whalespout of chaotic fluids followed its descent, no mad thrashing of limbs and gnashing of teeth. It collapsed with a strangled yelp, the clink of metal-upon-metal, and lay still.*

## • THE CURIOSITY by Dan Abnett

Macks suddenly swung left, her riot-gun aimed. One of Skoh's men stood on the other side of the clearing, half-hidden by a tree and only now visible to them. He wasn't actually standing. His body was lodged upright by the tree itself. His head was bowed onto his chest, the angle of the tilt far, far greater than any spine should allow. Macks approached him tentatively, and reached out a hand. When she touched him, he sagged sideways and his head flopped further. Drusher saw that only the merest shred of skin kept it attached to the rest of the body.

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